Once Upon A Cannibal

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Once Upon A Cannibal

by TheSilverQueen

Summary

Will Graham is settling down to have a nice, quiet little birthday to himself when a girl knocks on his front door.

"Hi!" she says. "My name is Abigail Lecter, and I'm your daughter."

Notes

This work is for Reel Hannibal 2019 and was based off of the tv show Once Upon A Time. It's basically a story where every fairytale character who ever existed is real and lives in our world, and I love fairytales, so of course I decided to toss that and Hannibal together. If you've seen the show, then Will is going to be playing the role of Emma Swan, Abigail is basically Henry Mills, and Hannibal is a mixture of Rumplestiltskin and the Evil Queen.

Also, a warning: The endgame here is Hannigram and Will is definitely gay, but this story does discuss how he discovered this by sleeping with a woman. Please don't flame me for acknowledging that Will might've slept with both men and women or the woman I choose to pair Will with before he realized he was gay.

See the end of the work for more notes

the perils of time

Chapter Summary

The peril of time is that it can pass very quickly, and take precious memories with it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once upon a time, a teenager snuck out of a house and went to a party. He drank some alcohol, he shuffle-danced awkwardly in the crowd, and he met a pretty fellow teenager. She smiled and crooked her finger, and he blushed and followed, and the rest of the night passed in a drunken blur that ended with clothes on the floor and two tired teenagers. In the morning, the girl was gone, and the boy dressed and snuck back into his house.

Ten months later, a Virginia orphanage found a beautiful baby girl on its doorstep. A note was tucked into her blanket, which had five simple written words on it: The father is William Graham. *The orphanage matron took the note at its word and duly ensured the birth certificate was filled out.*

The baby girl was adopted only days later, and her new father called her Abigail.

Beverly throws a cupcake at Will the second he sets foot into her office, which is really just a great example of today is going. He walked into a cloud of awkward applause when he entered his classroom, his office cubby is cluttered with confetti and serial killer stalker love notes, and now Beverly is grinning ear to ear as she follows up the cupcake with a fistful of balloons and more confetti.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” she yells.

Will winces. This is why he hates the fact that his birthday is practically public record, thanks to Freddie Lounds.

“Do we have to let the whole world know?” Will hisses, kicking the door shut as fast as he can. Unfortunately, he can’t stay mad at Beverly for long and she knows it, so she just keeps on grinning.

“You’re hitting the big leagues now,” Beverly says solemnly. “The big three zero.”

“I thought the big league was when you hit twenty-one.”

“That’s the drinking big league. This is the true adult big league where you’re free to have a midlife crisis about your life.”

“Very funny,” Will tells her, but he takes the cupcake. Jack’s present had been more gruesome crime photos and he certainly has no intention of opening the serial killer gifts in his office cubby, so Beverly’s cupcake is likely going to be the only actual gift he gets this year. And since his original intention for tonight had been to sit on his floor and cuddle with his dogs and crack open a bottle, it’s kind of nice to consider adding a cupcake to the mix.

Well, as long as his dogs don’t get into the cupcake anyways.

Beverly points a finger at him. “You better actually eat that, mister. I will inspect the box for crumbs.”

“I just had lunch! I’ll eat it when I get home.”

“Says the guy who’s usually here until eight on a good day.”

“Jack’s deposed in court today.” It’s a beautiful thing when Jack is tied up in court. It means Will is going to have a nice, stress-free day – barring a dead body being found in a weird location. The usual FBI crews don’t tend to call him out unless Jack is there or the weirdness factor is too high. “After my class is done, I’m out of here.”

“Aw, did too many students make a pass at you?”

Now it’s Will’s turn to point a finger at her. “That only happened once, and we both know you were behind that.”

“I admit to nothing.”

Will does indeed make a break for it the second his afternoon class is over, and to his relief, Jack doesn’t appear in the parking lot like an angry ghost, so Will is home free as soon as he pulls out of the parking lot. With great relish, he puts his phone on silent and then heads for the grocery store to pick up the essentials for his dogs.

His pack, at least, doesn’t know it’s his birthday, but they greet him as enthusiastically as always. Even Winston, who’s only been with them for a couple weeks, wags his tail and licks all over Will’s face.

Sometimes, he thinks his dogs are the only beings that appreciate him exactly as is.

He makes a quick dinner, spreads out his pack’s meal, lets them out for a nice long run in the garden, and then he settles down in front of the fire with his dogs happily milling about.

One by one, he wrestles with the ones that are still energetic (Buster), pets the ones that are settling down for a nice long snooze (Zoe), and grabs a brush for the weekly grooming session that’s more like a battle (Winston). Unfortunately, they tend to think it’s a game and usually Will eventually ends up trapping them against a sofa, but today Will is full, he’s warm, and he didn’t need to deal with Jack or a dead body so he’s feeling pretty lenient. When Winston starts squirming a bit too much, he just laughs and gives up.

He falls asleep there, in front of the fire with his family around him, and he’s happy.

Of course, two hours later, his bladder is staging a mutiny, so Will stumbles to his feet and takes care of business. It's on his way back that he spots the lone cupcake on the table, still waiting to be eaten.

It's not a very exciting cupcake, just a plain vanilla one with frosting and sprinkles and a blue star candle on the top, but then again, that's just how Will likes things: simple and uncomplicated. He'd take a single cupcake over a giant uncomfortable party every day, and thank god Beverly understands that and accepts it. Zeller and Price still turn green whenever they see confetti around the office, because it's been ten months and pieces are still turning up in random places.

Will gets a match and lights the candle, because why the hell not. "Happy birthday to me," he says, and blows it out.

A second later, there's a furious pounding on his door.

His dogs begin to bark like mad, and Will has no idea why they didn't bark beforehand – they usually all start running towards the door and barking if they hear someone coming up the driveway – but he grabs his phone and makes his way towards the door. Will's neighbors are all pretty far away because all the land around here has farms with wide open stretches for grazing or crops, and they'd be more likely to call 911 than come pound on Will's door. And it isn't Jack either; he usually starts yelling at the top of his lungs after the first knock, on top of the million calls he places to Will.

The pounding takes on a rhythm, *thud thud, thud thud*, and Will realizes the person is literally banging on his door with both hands.

Will groans and goes to open the door.

For a second, he's confused because there's no one there – and then he looks down and realizes there is someone there, they're just a little shorter than he expected. After all, he was looking at the level of an adult's eye line, and instead the person at his door is a teenager at best, with wind-swept hair, cheeks brightened by the cold, thick scarf around her neck, sturdy boots, and a backpack slung neatly over shoulders. He'd almost think she was a hitchhiker, except Will is not a truck driver and the way her smile brightens when she sees him makes him suspicious.

"Hi!" she says.

"Um," Will says, half-confused and half-focused on keeping his dogs from leaping at her.

She's completely fine with that eloquent response apparently. "Are you Will Graham?"

God damn Freddie Lounds, Will thinks, and he sighs. "Listen, kid, I have no intention to giving you a soundbite or an interview or whatever you came all the way out here for, so please go home. It's freezing."

"But are you Will Graham?"

“I doubt you would have driven all the way out to Wolf Trap for nothing. Tell Lounds that tomorrow I’m making her take down my address.”

And then he goes to close the door, but she sticks her whole leg in it. Her face makes Will pause; there’s desperation there, but not the kind that screams *blogger/journalist trying to hit jackpot*. It looks a lot more like the kind that would have her camp out on his porch until he listens – or worse, pick his lock and park her butt in the kitchen.

“Seriously, whatever you want, just go home.”

“I can’t do that, because what I want is right here,” she says. She takes a deep breath. “My name is Abigail. I’m your daughter.”

The next ten minutes pass in a daze. Will has no idea what he does, but he must have let the girl in, because the next time he blinks, he’s sitting at his kitchen table staring at her as she rummages through his fridge and liberates a juice bottle. When Winston barks at her and she pets him, Will decides she must be a real actual person and not a hallucination.

Which is unfortunate. He’d been really hoping that this was a hallucination.

“You can’t be my daughter.”

The girl takes a big swig of juice and wipes her mouth. “My birth certificate says otherwise.”

“I never signed any birth certificate. I’m pretty sure I’d remember that.” Will takes another look at her, at her dark hair and bright eyes and mall of America face, and then he adds, “Besides, I am definitely and one hundred percent gay so – ”

“So you’ve never ever slept with a woman?”

“I – ” Will starts to say, and then he stops. There’s a beer on the table, right next to the girl’s juice and the cupcake, and the sight of it triggers some faint memories. Like the exact, if slightly blurry, reason Will knows without a doubt that he’s gay. “That was *one night* a very long time ago.”

The girl smiles triumphantly. “One night is all it takes.”

Normally, Will would at this point call the police and report a crazy teenager in his house, but Will can read every emotion in her face. She truly and fully believes in what she is saying to Will, but she wasn’t confident until Will paused and admitted his drunken one-night stand. She came here with a very specific purpose of meeting him even though he totally could have carried on not being open the slight possibility that the girl in front of him is indeed his daughter. This is what convinces Will that she isn’t here to trick him or get a soundbite or profess her undying love using dead bodies.

Serial killer admirers are weird.

Will scrubs a hand down his face. He hates to admit it, but she has a point. One night *is* is all it takes. And it’s not like he’d exchanged numbers with the woman, so she probably wouldn’t

have been able to find him.

Hell, even if she had, Will was a poor teenager; he probably would have declined to play a role in his child's life.

"What – what did you say your name was again?"

The girl silently zips open her backpack and extracts a folder. Carefully, as if handling a bomb, she pulls out a faintly glossy sheet of paper and slides it across the table, staring at his face as if he holds all of the answers to the universe.

ABIGAIL GRAHAM, the birth certificate announces. Born April 4, 1997 in Minnesota. Father being William Graham and mother being –

Will frowns. "How come there's nothing about your mother?"

"I dunno. Records were sealed. This is all I have."

Will looks up. "Kid, if you came after me to find out who your mother was, you've wasted your time. I was very drunk that night. And spoiler alert, but you typically don't exchange numbers for a one night stand. Hell, I don't even know how your mother apparently knew *my* name."

"My dad could help you remember. He's a psychiatrist."

"Of course he is." Then the words actually register, and Will sits bolt upright. In hindsight, it's kind of obvious – Abigail is too young to have aged out of foster care or the tender guardianship of the state, but the scarf on her neck is well-loved and she wears it with pride and attachment, so someone picked it out for her specifically – but the reminder that Abigail has a life and a family outside of Will makes him suddenly wide awake. "Wait, you have a dad? Where is he?"

Abigail fingers the end of her scarf. "He knows I'm here."

And wow, Will doesn't even need empathy to know that that is a blatant lie. He slides the birth certificate back across to her and goes to grab his car keys and his hat. "Come on, kid. Get in the car. We're heading back to Florida. You can give me more specific directions when we get there, or I can call the missing child phone line and learn from there."

"How'd you – "

"The envelope has a Florida address on it. Come on. I'm not getting arrested for child kidnapping."

As Will gets his phone to make arrangements for his dogs, he could swear that a little smile appears on Abigail's face as she turns to get her backpack. It's a little . . . smug. Almost like she wanted him to go to Florida with her. Almost like she planned on it.

Which. Well. That's kind of weird, especially if she actually has a family.

But Will is weird too, so maybe it's genetic.

Will is both extremely tired and extremely grumpy when he finally pulls up in front of the biggest house he's ever seen in his life. Abigail had been amused when he asked for directions in hour two, but by hour four she was desperate for a bathroom break, and by hour six she had finally cracked and given him the address for her father.

Apparently, her father owns a giant mansion with an expansive land, a pool, and the fanciest gates Will's ever seen. In Florida.

No wonder Abigail had had the money to not only track him down but travel all the way to him.

Abigail is sleeping in the passenger seat, so Will decides to take the coward's way out and goes up the long driveway alone to ring the doorbell. He's betting that a place this fancy must have some kind of security system, and sure enough, only seconds pass before the door opens.

Will is pretty sure he deserves a special place in hell for wanting to climb into the pants of the guy who adopted the daughter he didn't even know existed, but *damn*. Whoever Mr. 3 Lithuania Avenue is, he is hot, with a sharp three piece suit and carefully coiffed hair and long arms and angular cheekbones and piercing eyes. Will would totally tap that if there wasn't a passed out teenager in his car.

"May I help you?"

Even the man's voice is hot. Will can't place the accent, but it's European and beautiful.

Will jerks a finger over his shoulder. "Um, sorry to disturb you, but are you missing a kid? Sixteen years old, dark hair, blue eyes, says her name is Abigail?"

The man's eyes go from Will to his car so fast it's like whiplash. He immediately shoulders past Will and takes off down the walkway towards the car. He doesn't run, exactly, so he maintains his cool edge, but Will can read the concern in how he walks just fast enough that his perfectly pressed suit starts to pull and wrinkle a little instead of strutting a nice slow walk that would ensure his clothes stayed perfect.

Will stays just a second, because damn does the back end rival the front for hotness, and then he follows.

Fortunately, this delay means that he's out of earshot for most of the conversation when Mr. 3 Lithuania Avenue pulls Abigail out and hugs her, so he only hears the tail end of it. Unfortunately, that tail end is "I found my *real* dad!" and Abigail running up into the house.

Which leaves Mr. 3 Lithuania Avenue and Will staring awkwardly at each other.

After a long moment, the man clears his throat and straightens his tie. "My apologies, I've been rude. Thank you for returning my daughter. My name is Hannibal Lecter. Would you

like to come inside?”

“Again, I apologize that Abigail has interrupted your life,” Mr. Lecter says as he hands Will a cup of tea in the fanciest china piece that Will’s laid eyes on, never mind touched. “I suppose the warning signs were there, but I had told her years ago that her adoption records were sealed, meaning that neither of the parents desired contact. I thought she had accepted this.”

Will shrugs, but only slightly. He doesn’t really want to spill tea anywhere, and the chair he’s sitting in is as fancy as the cup. “Teenagers are supposed to be independent, I guess.”

“You guess?” Mr. Lecter smiles slightly. “Are you saying you weren’t?”

“Fair point.”

“I can only assume she went to you because she wanted to know who her mother was. I’m unmarried, you see,” Mr. Lecter explains. “Even when she was a child, she was very sensitive about the fact that it was her father bringing her to dance lessons because she had no mother to sew her dresses or do her make-up.”

Will eyes the man’s perfectly matched tie and pocket square. “Something tells me the objection wasn’t due to lack of skill.”

“You surmise correctly. However, I do not blame her. Family is a large part of who we are.”

“I don’t either. I get it. I never knew my mother either.”

One eyebrow goes up, but only slightly. This man is a master of controlling his face; it must come in handy for his job as a shrink. It also explains where Abigail got her ability to control her face, because it sure as hell didn’t come from Will. “Indeed? So you are here to assist her in locating her mother?”

Will shifts uncomfortably. “Honestly, I only came here to bring her back to her home and her family,” he confesses. “This is a nice place, and you seem to care for her.”

“I love Abigail very much,” Mr. Lecter says quietly, “and I have given her everything I can, but some things remain out of reach. Pardon me, but you seem reluctant to divulge the identity of her mother. Surely you would understand why such information might put her at ease, so that she might have the opportunity you were denied as a child. As one father to another, I would ask why you seem to want to leave my house immediately and not assist Abigail?”

Definitely a shrink, Will thinks. He puts down his cup and takes a deep breath. Mr. Lecter is completely right, but he doesn’t have all the facts. “I’d love to help Abigail. But I was seriously drunk that night. I don’t know anything that might be of use.”

“Hmm. Perhaps I can help you. Abigail may have mentioned I am a psychiatrist.”

“Yeah, I don’t tend to get along with shrinks.”

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding meeting my eyes?”

“I have . . . let’s call it an inconvenient ability. Eyes are distracting, you know – you see too much, you don’t see enough. And – And it’s hard to focus when you’re thinking, um, ‘Oh, that shirt does not match those pants’ or ‘Is that a piece of dog hair?’”

Mr. Lecter inclines his head, acknowledging the barb, and leans back. “Pure empathy.”

“More like an active imagination.”

“I see. Still. It would be remiss of me not to attempt to try and convince you to let me help you. For Abigail’s sake.”

Will winces. Apparently he isn’t the only person in the room who can read details in minute facial expressions. And Will has only know his daughter for half a day, but still . . . The idea of giving her the closure he was denied as a child is so, so tempting. It might lead nowhere, but Abigail wouldn’t live forever in the land of maybe the way Will has. And aren’t parents supposed to ensure that their children have better lives than them?

Mr. Lecter smiles again. “I’m sorry, Mr. Graham. Observing is what I do. I can’t shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off. And I think Abigail might like to get to know you as well.”

“You hate the fact that I’m getting dog hair on your chair, but you want to get to know me? Dog hair kinda comes with the territory.”

“The chair can be cleaned.” Mr. Lecter leans forward, all sincerity and charm. “Please, Mr. Graham. For Abigail’s sake. And so that we can rest easily in our beds knowing that she isn’t running off halfway across the country to track down her mother on her own.”

Will thinks back to Abigail’s expression – confidence and determination and a burning desire to *know* – and knows without a doubt that he’s right.

He holds out his hand. “All right, Mr. Lecter. You’ve got a deal.”

“Call me Hannibal. It appears we’ll be spending some time together,” Hannibal says, clasping his hand.

“Then call me Will. Mr. Graham makes me feel old.”

Hannibal laughs. “Fair enough. But for now,” he says, standing up and setting his own cup of tea aside, “my duties as a host prevail. I have a spare bedroom upstairs, and I can reheat some food for you. I imagine the long drive has left you famished.”

Just in time, Will’s stomach rumbles, so he just nods meekly.

Hannibal is gone for approximately three minutes, and when he returns, he’s carrying a plate with a little steaming pie on it, and it smells like the most amazing thing Will’s ever been in the same room with. It’s probably just the fact that Will hasn’t eaten in hours, and the last

thing he did eat was a cupcake hastily shoved in his mouth, but Will still feels his mouth water in anticipation as Hannibal neatly sets the plate down.

“Oh,” Hannibal says abruptly as Will picks up his fork, “forgive me, I forgot to ask. Are you a vegetarian? Because I must warn you, nothing on that plate is vegetarian.”

“Definitely not,” Will says.

“Then, by all means, bon appétit. I look forward to working with you.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 2 = Hanni getting nice and personal with Will about who Abigail's mother is.

And yes, Will is eating people-pie.

the perils of murder

Chapter Summary

The peril of murder is that sometimes it gets in the way of romance.

Chapter Notes

Lots of warnings before you all dive in! Sorry.

1) I know NOTHING about memory retrieval, light stimulation, or hypnosis. when you read Will's little therapy sessions, they are probably going to be laughably wrong about all of that.
2) There's a lot of discussion about whether it's right or wrong to kill pigs and eat them. I promise it's not a dig at vegetarianism or veganism, it's just Hannibal cracking his cannibal puns and seeing how long it takes Will to notice. (So basically the show)
3) I am truly and deeply sorry for the length of this chapter. I meant this fic - the entire total fic - to be around 12k or so at maximum, and this chapter in and of itself is 12k. But I am also stubborn and rather tired of staring at this chapter, so I refused my friends' well-meaning and smart advice that I probably should have taken, and I am not going to split this chapter in half. Nor will I split the next one if the same thing occurs. (God I hope not)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once upon a time, a teenager received a draft notice for the duke's war. Agreeing would leave the teenager's young sister alone in the world; refusing, the teenager was told by the smug recruiter, would mean execution. The teenager decided to create a third option and tore out the recruiter's throat with his teeth.

The teenager and his sister went on the run, dodging soldiers and recruiters and death by fire. Every time they were found, the teenager again faced the choice of war or execution, and again chose the third option of murder.

The bounty upon the teenager's head rose and rose and rose, until they spent more time hiding in the woods and scavenging food than blending into the new towns they came across. Eventually, they came upon a well-stocked campsite and settled down for the night. The sister was cold and tired and scared, and the teenager kept watch while she ate and sang to her until she slept. He sat outside the tent with a knife in his lap, ever watchful for more soldiers.

Instead of a soldier, it was an old beggar who found them.

The beggar did not turn the teenager in, despite the bounty, and instead begrudgingly shared his food. He eyed the teenager's rusty knife with disdain, and told him a fantastic story of a dagger of untold power. This, he told the teenager, was a dagger that bestowed upon the wielder the power to call upon the Dark One, a sorcerer unmatched by any in the land – the same sorcerer, in fact, that the duke was using to fight the war. It was heavily guarded, unfortunately, but what was the price one might be willing to pay to secure the safety of family?

The teenager listened, and the teenager thought, and the teenager planned.

The next night, the teenager left his sister with the knife and told her he was going to steal more food. Instead, he stole a horse and made his way to the duke's castle, where he climbed over the walls and skittered around using the ceiling beams and dusty old servants' corridors. Eventually, after three days of intense search, he found what he was looking for.

The teenager crept back to the campsite, raised the dagger, and called the Dark One to him. When the Dark One came, they seemed amused; they cooed at the teenager's sister, laughed at the teenager's circumstances, and mockingly requested the teenager's name, so that they might know whom they now called master.

The teenager stepped close, as if to whisper into the Dark One's ear, and then stabbed them in the heart.

The Dark One gasped, and fell, and crumbled to ash. Meanwhile, the teenager groaned and shook and laughed, and darkness crept into his skin as great wings of ebony unfurled from his back and antlers of blood twisted their way from his head into the sky. The dagger gleamed, like coal thrown upon the fire, and spun once, twice, thrice. With the third turn, the teenager vanished, and the dagger fell to the floor, pulsing like a heart.

When it was over, the sister crept forward, and found a name writ upon the dagger. But it was not the name the teenager had called.

Now, it said ***Hannibal.***

Will wakes up to find himself on a couch. A very comfy couch, to be sure, but it lacks the faint undertone of sweat and dog that Will usually inhales. He is also underneath a very comfortable plush blanket, which, again, smells a lot cleaner than anything Will owns, given that he gave up on keeping his pack off the couch years ago.

When he opens his eyes, he finds himself in what he guesses is Hannibal's living room. There's a grand piano, which brings back fond, if faint, memories of trying to pluck at keys with his father sitting on the ground and tinkering with an engine, along with a harpsichord, because why not. One entire wall is given over to bookshelves, all with elegant and mostly monochrome book spines that make Will suspect they're all either highbrow literature, medical textbooks, expensive first edition novels, or all of the above. There's also a squashy bean bag chair, which Will knows immediately is because of Abigail; he certainly can't imagine Hannibal sitting in it. On the opposite wall is a fireplace below a dust-free and neatly arranged mantel, with a few tasteful pictures of Abigail at various ages carefully spaced out.

But the true glory is the enormous floor to ceiling window that makes up the wall Will is facing, sandwiched in between the bookshelves and the mantel. It is made of one long piece of unbroken glass, which must be a pain since it doesn't have an option to let in the breeze, but it offers a stunning view of part of Hannibal's yard, which contains a flower garden and a fountain.

Will pinches himself, just because. He can't imagine how much this house costs, given that it looks enormous, has an enormous yard, and has access to the beachfront.

"Good morning, Will."

Will falls off the couch, because he is just that smooth, and by the time he's wrestled the blanket off of him, Hannibal has his lips pressed together in such a way that Will knows he's holding back laughter, because he – unlike Will – is a gentleman with actual manners.

"Er," Will says, scrambling to his feet. "I'm really sorry, I did not mean to, uh, pass out on you there."

"No apologies necessary," Hannibal says. He inclines his head at the little table next to the couch, where, yep, there's Will's empty plate and almost empty wineglass. "You made a long drive to reach me, and my wine is . . . a particularly good vintage. I would have tried to move you into one of the guest rooms, but I decided it was better to let you sleep in peace."

"You figured right," Will replies. "I've usually got a better tolerance, but one of my dogs knocked over my stash of whiskey and I haven't been able to restock."

Hannibal does one of those tiny smiles again. It's very endearing.

God, Will's dry spell really picks inappropriate moments to rear up and make Will consider ending it.

"Does, uh, your guest room have a bathroom I could clean myself up in?"

"But of course. Follow me."

It's only ten minutes later, after they've climbed two sets of stairs and passed a lot of rooms, that Will realizes Hannibal had said *guest rooms* instead of *guest room*. As in, more than one. And not like an all-purpose room that could serve as a study or a guest room or a storage room; Hannibal helpfully points out the separate storage room and linen closet on the second floor. Finally, on the third floor, Hannibal points out his master bedroom, nestled in a nice little alcove with a set of armor outside; Abigail's room on one side with an ensuite and adjoining study room; and then Will's guest room, which also has an ensuite and an adjoining study.

Rich people, Will thinks in a daze, taking in the richly decorated bedroom that comes with a four poster bed, a desk, floor length mirror, and walk-in closet.

He can't imagine what the master bedroom looks like.

Hannibal, oblivious to Will's shock, merely places Will's hastily packed go-bag of clothes and supplies on a chair in the little seating area next to the bed, and finishes the informational tour. "The second floor holds my other guest rooms, as well as Abigail's music room, but I figured you might be more comfortable on this floor, which is where we retire as a family. I hope this room is suitable for your accommodation?"

Will blinks, and then pinches himself again. "This is . . . more than suitable. I've literally stayed in hotel rooms that weren't as fancy as this."

Hannibal smiles. "I was lucky; I managed to find a good mentor to nurture my head for finance and I found that I enjoyed a suitably profitable career. When I adopted Abigail, I found I wanted a big house for her to run around and grow up in."

Will imagines little Abigail toddling her first steps in the gorgeous first floor study, or giggling and running down the hallways to escape a bath, or creeping into closets and bathrooms to play hide-and-seek. The images fill his chest with warmth, even though he had nothing to do with them. If he had known and been the one to give Abigail up for adoption, he'd definitely want a life like this for her.

"She'd definitely get her steps in. This house is . . . really big."

"I found it was particularly convenient when she going through her adolescent phase," Hannibal confesses. "Her temper tantrums were far more tolerable when we could have a floor to ourselves."

Will tries to imagine prim and proper three-piece suit Hannibal trying to calm down an angry Abigail, and he can't help laugh at the imagery.

"I assure you, it definitely was no source of amusement back then," Hannibal says, but he too is smiling. "In any case, I shall leave you to explore your room. Take as long as you like. When you're ready, we will be having breakfast in the kitchen on the first floor. Abigail has demanded waffles and bacon, but if you'd like something different, please let me know."

"Uh, no, that sounds great."

It turns out that the bathroom is just as richly decorated and huge as the bed, with a shower containing two showerheads, a bench, and enough room to have a four person orgy; an equally spacious bathtub, because the shower wasn't enough, apparently; two sinks in a gleaming white countertop with two cabinets bracketing a mirror above; and a dresser, chair, and rug.

Will sidles around the bathtub to reach the toilet. It has an automatic lid that lifts and glows a faint blue when the motion sensor is triggered, a heated seat, and a bidet option.

Rich people, Will thinks hysterically, and flees back out.

Will gets lost finding the kitchen, because this is his life now: getting turned around in endless circles around his daughter's adoptive father's enormous mansion of a house. He

finds the first floor easily enough, but he wanders into a second study, a den, a home theater with the biggest couch Will's ever seen and an ever bigger TV, an exercise room with very expensive equipment and another TV, a library, and greenhouse room before he finally gives up and just follows the sweet, sweet smell of bacon to the kitchen. On the way he passes a very nice living room, and yet another hallway full of more rooms to explore, but Will ignores that because honestly, he's lost enough and doesn't need to add more rooms to be confused by.

In the kitchen, Will finds Abigail perched on one side of the kitchen island, a plate of waffles and eggs and bacon in front of her. She has one waffle speared on a fork, but it's hovering halfway to her mouth as she watches Hannibal toss eggs into the air and crack them efficiently on his spatula on the way down.

"You gotta teach me how to do that one day," Abigail is saying.

"You say that every time, my dear, and yet conveniently have homework to do whenever I offer," Hannibal replies dryly.

Hannibal sets the spatula down and begins whisking in quick, efficient movements. The drool accumulating in Will's mouth totally has everything to do with the bacon he smells and is not at all related to how Hannibal has rolled his sleeves up to expose his muscular forearms as he whisks.

"Ah, hello, Will."

Will takes a seat next to Abigail, watching how she smoothly slides a plate over from the neat stack on one side of the island. As it passes along the table, Hannibal efficiently transfers first a couple waffles and then some of the eggs and bacon, so that it comes to a rest in front of Will containing a full breakfast. And that doesn't even count the spread of fresh fruit salad, coffee, and orange juice.

"Jam, syrup, cinnamon, or powdered sugar?" Abigail says through a mouthful of waffle.

"Abigail," Hannibal reprimands without turning around from the stove. Will looks up and starts off with honest intent of ogling the man's very fine behind, but then he's distracted by the fact that Hannibal apparently has two ovens, a fridge big enough for three men to comfortably fit inside, and more chef's knives than Will has utensils.

Abigail makes a contrite face, but instead of just apologizing, she swallows the entire mouthful in a giant gulp. "I like strawberry syrup and powdered sugar, but Papa says that's 'entirely too much sugar' and I can only have one or the other."

"Well," Will says, helping himself to the maple syrup, "I can't say he's wrong."

Abigail makes a face. "Not you too."

Hannibal, apparently done with whatever culinary magic he was doing on the stove, finally turns around and pulls a stool round so that he can eat his own breakfast. Abigail's plate is a

mess of cinnamon and powdered sugar and Will's has sticky syrup stains, but Hannibal's plate is a neat and orderly set of three piles: scrambled eggs, sausage, and waffles.

"I'm afraid that I am very careful about what I put into my body," Hannibal explains as he dissects his waffle. "And that habit was cultivated long before I met Abigail. I have therefore done my best to instill the same habit in her . . . with varying success."

"Fried Oreos are amazing and you can't convince me otherwise," Abigail says in a sing-song voice.

"I have made you Oreos."

"No, you made me homemade chocolate biscuits and homemade cream-filling," Abigail says patiently. "Oreos are bought in a store."

Will looks from Abigail to Hannibal, and sees the way Hannibal's lips tighten in disgust. He truly believes that Abigail should eat the best food, and it's an instinct that goes bone deep, like the instinct that drives Will to stop in the middle of a road and lure a frightened dog home. His compulsion to provide, to cook, to ensure that she is never wanting for food – it is rooted deeply in Hannibal.

It also means that this whole cooking-what-Abigail-wants-for-breakfast-from-scratch can't be a once a week special occasion.

"You . . . make everything?" Will says slowly, taking in the giant fridge and dual ovens and gleaming stove with a new appreciation. "Breakfast, lunch, and dinner?"

"As I said: I am very careful with what I put in my body. I believe the saying goes: you are what you eat."

"Well," Will says, loading up another mouthful of sausage and eggs, "if that's true, then I am one-part McDonalds, one-part fish, and one-part microwave meals."

Abigail beams and high fives him. Hannibal gives an actual minute shudder of disgust, and pushes the entire stack of remaining waffles in his direction. All in all, it's a pretty nice breakfast experience.

Afterwards, when Abigail skips off to do whatever teenagers do during summer break, Hannibal loads all of the dishes into his fancy dishwasher and then beckons Will to follow him into an office. Will's not sure what the rules are on holding therapy sessions in one's house, but there's a very nice desk, some tasteful sculptures dotting the room, a few art pieces on the walls, and the standard leather therapy reclining chairs Will has seen in every psychiatrist's office.

"This is my home office," Hannibal says, leaning casually against the desk. "I try to keep my work and home life separate, for Abigail's sake, but sometimes it helps to review the files here in the privacy of my home."

“And you’re telling me this why?”

“I would like to offer you the option of . . . jogging loose your memories here, or going to my practice office.”

Will looks sharply at him. Hannibal’s face is open and disarming – but he’s a psychiatrist. Will can still sense the burning curiosity under the impartial mask of the therapist. He really wants to get into Will’s brain.

“I’m pretty sure I can’t afford your services, Doctor.”

“Consider them conversations,” Hannibal says slyly. “From one friend to another. Or perhaps one father to another.”

Will rubs at his face. He sits down, but on the arm of one of the chairs, because like hell is he going to lie back and cross his legs and stare at the ceiling while recounting blurry old memories. “I don’t think I can really claim to be Abigail’s father. I mean, I didn’t even know she existed until two days ago.”

Hannibal shrugs. “Fatherhood is not bound by blood alone. The bonds of family can be forged by time spent together, or the sense of duty from one towards another. You felt a duty to Abigail, as I do; isn’t that why you agreed to stay?”

“Not forever. Not like you. I only asked for two weeks of vacation.”

“Hmm. Good luck convincing Abigail to let you go, now that she’s got her claws in you,” Hannibal says wryly.

“Skype and FaceTime.”

“As I said: good luck.” Hannibal shifts, sliding his hands into his pocket and crossing one leg over the other. He’s matching Will’s position, and it would totally work to relax Will if Will didn’t know he was doing it on purpose. “Now then: there are several methods that may allow you to successfully retrieve the memories of Abigail’s mother. Some are more intensive than others. I propose we begin with milder methods, like imagination or scent, before we elect to utilize something akin to, say, hypnosis or light stimulation.”

Will has to grin at that. “Have you ever tried to hypnotize someone with empathy, Doctor?”

“I can’t say I’ve ever met anyone like you.”

Wow, Will thinks, taking in the warmth in Hannibal’s voice and the twinkle in his eyes. *Is Hannibal* flirting *with me???* In all honesty, he’s probably not. He’s probably just trying to make nice with the biological father of the girl he adopted so that said biological father doesn’t start any problems.

Aaand Hannibal is still patiently waiting for a response.

“Well, word of advice: it’s pretty difficult,” Will tells him, trying to keep it together and be a little less of a weirdo. “Usually I end up seeing a lot more about you than you might end up

getting out of me. Perks of an active imagination."

"You aren't the only one who can learn how to build forts," Hannibal replies, tapping at the side of his head for emphasis. "I learned a technique when I was young, wherein you create a memory palace to contain all that you wish to hold dear. My palace is vast, even by medieval standards. The foyer is of Norman Chapel in Palermo." He pauses. "Abigail . . . She has a wing all to herself."

Will has heard of the technique before. More than one psychologist has suggested it to help him compartmentalize the killers he carries with him.

He's never tried, though. Empathy runs deep in Will, deeper than the marrow in his bones and neurons in his muscles. He cannot apply empathy only to his job and keep it shelved for the rest of his daily life, and so too would it permeate into every facet of any memory palace he might attempt to build.

Still, it's not like he can't appreciate the technique if used by other people.

"Your true home must feel rather small to you, then," Will comments. "I also imagine you never thought you'd need a wing all for Abigail."

Hannibal sends him a sharp look. "What makes you say that?"

"If you'd always intended to have one for you, you would have mentioned that you built one for her," Will says simply. "Instead, one built itself in your mind, perhaps without your conscious permission or awareness or control, and then you woke up one day and found that she was an integral part of your palace's construction, a thousand and one moments crystallized in snow globes and paintings lining the halls."

Hannibal regards him for a long, long moment of silence. Then he abruptly swivels to walk around his desk, seating himself in tightly controlled movements, but he doesn't seem at all angry. More like he's a little surprised how much Will read in one sentence, and wants a barrier between them to regain himself . . . and maybe shore up his walls.

"And here I thought we were going to utilize the time to examine you, my friend," Hannibal says.

"I figured you ought to understand what you were getting into," Will replies, allowing himself to fall completely in the seat. It's a little uncomfortable to keep sitting on the chair's armrest, and he'd rather keep himself on even footing with the psychiatrist about to go poking around in his brain. "I find people who work to make sure their minds are well-guarded are surprised about what I can pick up. Even when I don't mean."

Hannibal inclines his head. "It is indeed impressive. Even so, I now consider myself forewarned. Shall we begin?"

Their first exercises are entirely unproductive. Will has a naturally good memory, but he didn't really start working on it until adulthood, when university and his career put great

demands on his recall abilities. Plus he never really attributed much thinking about the incident, and he was very drunk, so there just isn't much to go off of.

Hannibal calls a halt to the activities around lunch. "Rest is just as important as progress," he says sternly.

Will groans and flops over in his chair. "What progress? We've done nothing!"

"We have established that the event took place at a house, and that Abigail's mother had blonde hair," Hannibal reminds him. "That is much more than we knew before."

"Yes, maybe blonde hair. Only rules out about, oh, half of America."

"Patience. We'll get there."

Hannibal at that point leaves to fetch lunch, apparently. Which he makes from scratch and by hand.

How wrong is it, Will wonders, staring shamelessly at Hannibal's retreating backside, *to sleep with my daughter's adopted dad?*

Apparently either Abigail interrupts Hannibal or Hannibal just has a fancy lunch planned, but Will gets bored about five minutes later and gets up to wander around Hannibal's home office. The office is saturated in deep reds and stark blacks, and it's a powerful statement of Hannibal's personality. It has art on the walls, but these aren't the tasteful bland pieces he saw in the hallways of the first floor; here Will spots art more in line with eclectic Renaissance paintings, like a naked lady canoodling with a swan, or a warrior mourning over the dead body of a brother-in-arms, or bodies interwoven into a giant circle.

When he passes by the warrior painting, a shaft of sunlight from the window makes something glint out of the corner of his eye. He turns and follows the gleam back to a scalpel resting besides neatly arranged pencils and paper on a table behind Hannibal's desk.

On top of the table are immaculately done drawings, so detailed that Will feels as though he's staring at a black-and-white photograph. There's a boarding school with a hundred windows, and a church cleaved in two, as if struck by a blast of lightning, and a truly creepy corpse with various instruments sticking out it.

A soft clink tells Will that Hannibal has returned with lunch.

"I didn't realize you were an artist as well as a doctor," Will says. "These are . . . amazing."

Hannibal steps up beside him, hands tucked neatly behind his back like a polite schoolboy, but pride radiates off of him. "I learned that a scalpel cuts better points than a pencil sharpener, and it helped me hone my art alongside my medicine. I eventually was offered an internship at John Hopkins for these drawings."

"That explains the Wound Man illustration."

"You recognize it?"

“Yeah, I was attached to the Chesapeake Ripper case a while ago. He, uh, replicated the illustration on one of his victims.”

“Ah, yes. It was all over the news.”

“What, even here in Florida?” Will asks in surprise. Hannibal is certainly well-read, but he’s not part of law enforcement, and Will sees no reason that he’d seek out the news from a state miles and miles away from him.

“No, I used to reside in Baltimore. It was some time ago, and I decided that I wanted a change of scenery. I came down here, and shortly afterwards I adopted Abigail. I’ve never returned.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t blame you,” Will mutters.

Hannibal clears his throat. “Are you still attached to the Chesapeake Ripper case?”

“No, not in years. He or she hasn’t done anything in a while.”

“I thought there was a Ripper killing not too long ago. Some doctor in an asylum who killed his nurse and escaped?”

Will wrinkles his nose. He’d hated every moment of the Abel Gideon fiasco, not the least of which was spending 45% of his time ignoring Chilton’s repeated and increasingly hysterical claims of being right about Dr. Gideon being the Ripper, 50% of his time evading Chilton’s overtures of psychological torture, and 5% dodging goddamn Freddie Lounds. It had been a right mess for all parties involved until Gideon had dropped off the map.

“He was just a copycat,” Will says. “And between you and me, a rather crude one at that. The Ripper elevates his victims into art; all Gideon did was splatter blood everywhere like he was trying to recreate Pollock but had no motivation of his own.”

Hannibal, weirdly enough, doesn’t at all look queasy about Will casually discussing murder over lunch. He actually seems fascinated.

Then again, the Ripper is almost as discussed in psychiatric circles as Will’s empathy, so maybe Hannibal just likes the direct FBI insight into the case. Most psychiatrists who write papers on the Ripper don’t have that.

“Lunch is getting cold,” Hannibal says eventually. “We should eat before we proceed in our efforts.”

By dinner time, they still haven’t gotten there. Will has remembered mostly useless details – loud thumping bass-heavy music, kids wearing glow necklaces, red cups scattered about the floor – but nothing particular about Abigail’s mother.

Hannibal is encouraging, as usual. His psychiatrist poker face comes into handy, because he betrays no impatience or annoyance at all.

“These memories are old,” he repeats for probably the tenth time. “Retrieving them will be a long journey, and we have made some very promising first steps. For now, it will be slow, but in time this may go faster. You should be pleased with what we have accomplished already, as opposed to being frustrated at what we have not.”

Will, for his part, does his best to smother himself in the couch cushions.

Hannibal makes macaroni and cheese for dinner at Abigail’s request, but because he’s Hannibal bloody Lecter, he makes it with: homemade pasta shells that he rolls out and cuts in front of them, homemade cheese from milk he sourced from a farmer’s market, and homemade bread crumbs from bread he baked a week ago. About the only thing that isn’t lovingly made in Hannibal’s kitchen and then transferred into the pan is the bacon, which Hannibal assures Will was bought from an ethical local butcher, the best of the best.

He also sets out supplies for a fresh salad and bacon-wrapped mushrooms, because why not.

Abigail is in the pantry, because Hannibal had scolded her for stealing some of the bacon and tasked her with retrieving some steaks for tomorrow’s meals. Will had offered to assist and been quickly been redirected by Hannibal to sit down.

“How on earth did you have time to do all of this?” Will asks from the island, where he’s been tasked with just sitting and drinking water because “therapy is hard work, Will, and you deserve to relax”.

Hannibal hums absently from where he’s stirring in salt to the water for the pasta. “I mastered time management skills very early on. Residency is an unforgiving teacher.”

“You cannot tell me Abigail never interrupted your cooking.”

“There were some trying moments during her childhood,” Hannibal says blandly. “However, I strove to ensure that she understood that kitchen was not a playground. At least, not until she was old enough to understand what might be dangerous to her.”

Will takes one look at him and stifles a laugh. “She hates cooking, doesn’t she?”

“Hate is a strong word.”

“Hannibal.”

“I . . . fear that I have not managed to instill in Abigail a proficiency in cooking beyond the bare minimum,” Hannibal admits. “I have been more successful in music.”

Will gives in and laughs so hard he has to lay his head on the counter.

When he finally manages to compose himself, Abigail is back and digging around in Hannibal’s frankly intimidating freezer to add the steaks. Then she comes to sit by Will, pouting because Hannibal has skillfully moved all of the bacon out of reach.

“If you had moved faster, you might have gotten some of it,” Will stage-whispers, because he is not above drama.

Abigail pouts. “I moved fast enough; Papa’s pantry is just enormous because he keeps all the meat in there.”

“Yes, how terrible of me, to try and keep up with a ravenous carnivore who likes to take bacon before dinner and ruin her appetite,” Hannibal says pointedly, stirring in the pan to help the cheese dissolve.

“You make me eat vegetables too.”

The macaroni and cheese is absolutely delicious, and Will almost moans when he eats his first bite, savoring the silky cheese and salty bacon and crisp breadcrumbs. Hannibal looks like he had heard the moan anyways, from how pleased he seems at the sight of Will and Abigail digging in like it’s their last meal on earth. It’s almost enough to make Will a convert to Hannibal’s fanaticism about homemade meals, but for the fact that Abigail riles Hannibal up by mentioning that she wants to go out and get ice cream for dessert instead of raiding Hannibal’s freezer. Hannibal attempting to convince her otherwise yet not be offended is funnier than anything Will’s ever seen.

After Hannibal wins the argument and they have homemade sorbet for dessert, they all retire upstairs. Will awkwardly says good night after Hannibal kisses Abigail on the cheek, and then he boggles again at the bathtub in his bathroom, whistles at the view from his window, and just shakes his head at the fireplace in his sitting room area. Then he climbs into bed, groaning at the fluffy softness, and sleeps.

That night, he dreams of kisses and blankets and secrets.

“You can call me anything you like,” laughs the girl in red. “Mary or Mia or Mariah.”

Will coaxes, “Just tell me your name. Your real name.”

“It’ll be our little secret,” whispers the girl. “You can keep a secret, can’t you, William Graham?”

But her name turns to diamonds and rubies instead of consonants and vowels in Will’s ear, and when he awakens he remembers nothing of the dream.

By the second day, Will is done with imaginary walks in his non-existent mind palace, and when he expresses his irritation, Hannibal ventures the suggestion of hypnotism again.

Will squints at him. He knows Hannibal is a doctor, of both body and mind, but it still seems . . . rather pedestrian of him to resort to the same tactics as street magician. “What, do all psychiatrists take hypnotism classes in medical school or something?” Hannibal isn’t the first by far to offer and not all of them have, but certainly a significant proportion.

“I assure you that my technique is based less on stage magic, and more on our understanding of the brain and how it responds to light and audio stimulation,” Hannibal says dryly.

“Hey, I watched you crack eggs by tossing them in the air and letting them land on the spatula edge; stage magic can’t be beyond you.”

“Juggling and tightrope walking are indeed one of my many skills.”

It’s said so deadpan Will literally can’t tell if he’s joking or not. He stares at Hannibal, eyes narrowed, for a good thirty seconds before he’s decides that Hannibal is just messing with him. If he truly had mastered those skills, he’d just demonstrate them for Will instead of talking about it. That being said, Will can totally see him looking up instructional videos tonight just to mess with Will even more tomorrow.

Unless he means juggling Abigail and his job and his cooking and his enormous house. Will can totally give him that as a life skill.

And hey, he’s managed to raise Abigail into a semi-normal teenager. Props to him.

“Okay, fine,” Will relents. “Do your worst, Doctor.”

Hannibal starts rummaging in his desk because of course he has the equipment already in hand like a creeper, and Will reclines in his chair and debates just how much he’ll regret this decision, like so many other life decisions.

“Just relax, Will. Breathe. In and out, in and out, in . . . and . . . out . . .”

And that’s the last thing he hears before he drifts off.

“It’ll be our little secret,” whispers the girl.

“TELL – ME – HER – NAME!” commands the beast, black as night with wings of ebony and bloody antlers that reach towards the stars.

“You can keep a secret, can’t you, William Graham?”

“ – Will? Can you hear me? Just breathe, in and out. That’s it.”

Will groans. His head is throbbing like he’s been hit with a truck (which he has been), his heart is racing like he’s been shot (which he has been), and his vision is blurry like he’s been whacked over the head (which he has been). He flails out, trying to determine where he is and what’s going on, and comes into contact with Hannibal’s arm. It’s a very nice muscular arm.

“Whas goin on,” Will slurs.

Something wet and blissfully cool lands over his eyes. Hannibal’s doing, probably.

Either way, it helps Will wake up and reorient himself. He is in Hannibal's home office, in Hannibal's house in Florida, letting Hannibal do hypnosis in his head to attempt to pry out Will's memories of Hannibal's adopted daughter. Right.

Oh, and he's now in Hannibal's lap. Great. Because this wasn't embarrassing enough already.

Will peers at Hannibal's upside down face. He seems . . . not concerned, exactly, because he's probably seen worse than a dazed patient from his emergency room days, but a little surprised. Like things didn't go the way he expected them to, and *that* makes him a little upset. Not at all Will – he seems rather happy that Will is awake – but in himself.

Will shuts his eyes. His head is still throbbing way too much right now. He needs to sort out his own emotional state before he attempts to divine Hannibal's.

Also, perhaps Will should have expected it from how muscular Hannibal's forearms were when he was cooking, but damn Hannibal must utilize a very rigorous workout because his thighs are very nice. Which Will knows from personal experience now, given that he's making Hannibal's thighs his pillow.

What is his life right now.

"No, keep your eyes open, Will," Hannibal instructs. "I prefer you conscious and aware."

"Don't we all," Will mutters.

But Hannibal is actually a doctor, so Will obediently opens his eyes. Hannibal, thankfully, managed to close the windows, so his eyeballs aren't on fire. "I take it back," Will croaks. "I should not have given you consent to do your worst."

Hannibal frowns. "I was attempting only a mild level of hypnotism," he says. "You reacted . . . unexpectedly."

"That's me: unexpected."

"Does your head still hurt?" Hannibal asks gently.

"Less now." Will shifts, mostly to get his legs tucked up on the recliner better but also to ensure he's not quite so deep in Hannibal's lap. He'd like to maintain some semblance of appearance that he's a grown man who can take care of himself. "Please tell me you at least got some useful information out."

"I'm afraid I got nothing more than a guess at a name," Hannibal says. "After that, you started going deeper and deeper, and I had to stop before you went so deep that I could not bring you back."

"And the guess was?"

"Something beginning with the letter 'M'. You slurred the name, unfortunately."

Will sighs. “Yeah, maybe blonde and maybe has a name starting the letter M. That’ll narrow down the search parameter of the entire American population.”

“It’s more than we had before.”

They break for lunch, mostly because Will is pretty sure he’d just fall asleep if Hannibal tried to use more hypnotism on him, and honestly not sure if that’d be less or more embarrassing than getting stuck and passing out on the man’s thigh.

Hannibal firmly tells him to sit down and drink orange juice to revitalize himself, so Will sulkily agrees whilst Abigail serves as Hannibal’s sous chef.

To be fair, shucking peas is not that exciting.

“Let me guess,” Will drawls in between sips, “these vegetables were grown in the backyard. Or the greenhouse. Right alongside whatever pig donated those pork loins.”

“We have a gardener,” Abigail says brightly, and yeah, he can’t really see Abigail gardening any more than he can see her cooking. “But Papa draws the line at pets on the property. So he just sources the pork from a very ethical butcher. Only the best of the best for us.”

“I bet the pigs don’t think it’s ethical,” Will says, just because.

Hannibal smiles from where he’s efficiently frying the pork loins. “Probably not. But if we were to discuss ethics, I like to argue that these pigs are doing a better service in death by filling the stomach of my family.” He taps Abigail on the nose, making her giggle. “Like my little carnivore over here. Surely the ethics of providing for one’s family cannot be disagreed with, even if it causes death to a few unfortunate pigs?”

Will raises his hands in mock surrender. “I enjoy bacon as much as the next guy, so no arguments here. Just a habit of asking questions left over from my day job as a teacher.”

“Well, Professor Graham,” Hannibal says, as he begins to plate the pork loins that are making Will’s mouth water, “we might continue the lessons over lunch.”

After lunch, Hannibal sets Will free to explore the house while he takes care of something in the office. Will suspects that Hannibal is just using that as an excuse to give them both time to recover from the abject failure of the hypnotism, but he accepts it anyways. Hannibal tells him to take advantage of the pool or the library or the boat dock, and Will accepts the invitation because he bets Hannibal’s boats would be amazing.

Of course, climbing all over Hannibal’s boat only lasts so long. It’s surprisingly not as opulent as the house, either because Hannibal has less interest in sailing or because it was meant for Abigail.

Will gets bored after about an hour and instead decides to try his hand at fishing. There are poles tucked neatly into a cabinet along with some boots, and then Will wanders around

trying to find the pantry because Hannibal also mentioned there might be bait in there, or at least things he could use for bait.

The pantry is as large and ostentatious as the kitchen. Will could easily do a couple laps in here and get his daily exercise. There are a million cabinets, and a couple freezers, and lots of shelves.

The first cabinet contains decorations. Will boggles at the various skulls and shells, and then closes it.

The second cabinet contains various spices. And by various, Will means enough to open a shop.

The third cabinet contains canned jams and jellies. But Will can tell they're all homemade, because each has a label in Hannibal's flowing script.

Finally, in one of the freezers, Will locates some chicken liver. It's quite a deep freezer, so he has lean pretty far in to retrieve his prize, and he grabs part of the wall for balance. When he reemerges, he nearly yelps when he pulls back his hand and brushes against something cold and metal.

Fortunately, it's just a key.

Unfortunately, Will knocks said key off the hook.

A few moments of grumbling later, and Will has retrieved the key from under one of the freezers. The key is a deep, dark brown, almost as if it was painted to blend in with the walls of the pantry, and Will can't see any door or lock it might open. The pantry only has one door, and it's the one Will opened to enter.

"Will? Are you okay?"

Will nearly jumps a foot into the air. He hadn't thought much of the plush rug that lays on the hallway outside the pantry, but now he realizes just how much it muffles footsteps in addition to being really comfortable.

"Uh, yeah," Will says, hastily turning around. "Hannibal said I could find some bait."

Abigail has her hand over her mouth, probably trying to stifle her laughter. Unfortunately, Will's empathy means he damn well knows she's laughing inside.

"Yeah, Papa keeps liver in here, and some worms in the greenhouse. Oh, you found the shed key."

"You have a shed?"

"We used to," Abigail says with a shrug. "But Papa demolished it when I was, like, ten years old. I wanted a range to practice shooting. It was only archery," she adds hastily. "With dull bolts. Papa didn't let me use guns until after I got my driver's license. He said it was to

ensure I would still be motivated to learn driving and not rely solely on him to play chauffeur."

Will sizes up his daughter. She's completely confident and casual about shooting and guns, but there's no gaudy display of trophies or guns in the house. At least, not in the first floor where guests can roam; the stag head is entirely fake, as Will discovered.

That being said, there are some antler racks in the second and third floor. But those are lovingly cleaned and shined and arranged, and contain no preservation of the flesh.

"Hannibal gave you a lecture on ethical hunting, didn't he?"

Abigail smiles. "'Waste not, want not' was the first lesson I ever learned with him. He once took me on a camping trip, and when we shot a deer, he taught me how to use every part of it: how to tan the skin, how to scrape off every last bit of meat, how to carve the bone into handles for knives."

"Intense camping trip."

"He said that we should honor the deer for its sacrifice," Abigail says. "That I should treat life with respect, and not waste a second of it. Do you ever hunt?'

"I'm more of a fisherman."

"Is that so different? One you stalk, the other you lure."

Will laughs. "Spoken like someone who has never fished. It's a lot more than just putting a lure on the line and hoping that a fish bites. You, uh. You wanna come learn?"

Abigail hesitates, and Will isn't surprised. Aside from some minor chitchat in the car and the light conversation at dinner, he really hasn't spent too much time getting to know her. He's actually spent more time with Hannibal trying to dig out her mother's name than he has getting to know his actual, living, breathing daughter. It's kind of sad.

So Will is definitely going to rectify it.

"I promise not to laugh if you fall in as long as you promise the same," Will bargains, offering it out as an olive branch.

Thankfully, Abigail takes it.

"Why not?" she says with a beautiful smile. "It's always nice to try something new."

If Hannibal is excellent at cooking and Will is excellent at fishing, Abigail is terrible at both.

It's kind of okay, though.

They return to the house sopping wet, because Abigail had eventually given up on fishing and decided to hop off the dock and swim and then mocked Will for not landing a fish, and Will had teased her right back about scaring off all the fish, and then Abigail had tried to yank Will in, and Will had grabbed one of the pillars and splashed her in the face instead, and then while he had been laughing, she'd actually managed to pull him in. And after that, well, it had just dissolved into straight out war.

On the bright side, all of the water shenanigans happened after Will had already caught three nice fish, so they didn't miss out on anything.

Will grabs the bucket and Abigail grabs the poles, and they troop back to the house. Abigail is still snickering, mostly because Will made the mistake of wearing one of his battered white shirts that he wouldn't getting dirty, and now it's wet.

"I can't *wait* for Papa to see you," Abigail giggles.

"Yeah, I bet he's going to be really happy that we're dripping water everywhere," Will says, eyeing the patio and wondering if he could coax someone into bringing him a towel.

"Papa likes to take a break to compose music, and the music room has a good view so he probably already knows," Abigail says dismissively. "But seriously, I cannot wait to get a glimpse his face when he sees you. Actually, you should take your shirt off!"

"What? No!"

"Coooooome on," Abigail wheedles. "For me, couldn't you do it for me?"

"Um, no."

"But I'm your daughter!"

"Abigail, I have two hands and both are carrying a very heavy bucket of fish. I am not putting it down to get sand on it and track even more mess into your father's house."

"Fine," she sulks. "I suppose Papa can still ogle you in your shirt, now that you're all wet."

Will gapes at Abigail. Her tone is entirely smug and self-satisfied, and there's a gleam in her eyes he really, really doesn't like.

God, maybe he should've paid more attention to Abigail when she watched him and Hannibal talk.

"Are you – Are you trying to *play matchmaker*?" Will splutters.

Abigail is completely and utterly unrepentant. "I've totally seen Papa checking you out, and don't you dare try and tell me you weren't checking *him* out. Because I've seen it. I have seen you blush! And Papa never gives just anyone carte blanche to wander around in the pantry and take whatever they like; it took me years before he let me go in there without supervision. So there. Plus the sexual tension is really getting annoying. *Please* sort that out so I can eat without being grossed out."

“There is no sexual tension! Your father does not have feelings for me. He’s just – being a good host to his fellow parent. That’s all.”

“If you’re trying to tell me parents don’t have sex, I know that’s a blatant lie. Papa gave me the sex talk after I walked in on him and some random guy.”

Will should retort that that wasn’t his point, but instead his mind latches onto the fact that Hannibal is apparently also gay, or at the very least bisexual and open to the male persuasion. It’s kind of his downfall, because shoving that desire back down into recesses of his mind means he’s silent for a few moments, and Abigail smirks like she’s put him in checkmate.

Unfortunately, at that point, Hannibal appears in the doorway, so Will ends the conversation rather than attempting to claw back victory from the jaws of defeat.

“My, my, we’ve been very busy today,” Hannibal says, looking them up and down.

Abigail bounds up to him, smiling so sweetly it’s hard to believe just a few minutes ago she was trying to convince Will to strip. “Will took me fishing and I kinda suck but it was great! Can we have fish for dinner, Papa?”

Hannibal looks hard-pressed not to smile back. “But of course, my darling. I would be delighted to add the bounty of your hard work to our table tonight. However, I must insist that you shower first. I shall take care of dinner preparation tonight, so please take your time to wash away the sand and salt.”

Then he takes the bucket from Will, and his not-smile becomes a real one. And a *roving* one, because damn, has Will really been this blind? That is most definitely a flirtatious gaze if he’s ever seen one.

“You too,” Hannibal says, ignorant of Will’s realization. “There are plenty of towels in the guest room.”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Will stammers weakly, releasing the bucket to him easily.

“Is there any particular way you’d like me to prepare these?”

“Nope,” Will says.

Abigail, on the other hand, appears to have a very clear opinion about how she likes her fish. Without pausing as she scrapes sand off of her feet, she points an accusing finger at her father. “Anything but the twisting fish circles. Please don’t do that again, it was weird and it looked like the fish were vomiting.”

“It symbolizes – ”

“It was still weird! Do you know how hard it was to keep a straight face during that dinner party?”

“And I appreciated your self-control,” Hannibal says mildly. “Now please, go shower.”

Thus scolded, Will and Abigail scamper off, leaving a faint trail of seawater and sand in their wake to a visibly disapproving yet equally amused Hannibal.

When Abigail turns to Will with a grin, he cuts her off. “Not. A. Word.”

She cackles like the demon she is and vanishes in her room.

“Why me,” Will moans, and heads into the shower to definitely not fantasize about the man who is raising his daughter and who apparently has the hots for him.

The problem with having empathy is that sometimes Will has or sees all the answers to something, but he doesn’t put the pieces together until much later. Jack always objects to this, mostly because he hates being woken up at 3 AM when Will has a realization about a killer and calls him. Will has never had a problem with it, because he has to get revenge on Jack somehow, and also people start thinking suspicious thoughts when he has all the answers immediately.

Like, suspicious as in *And what exactly is your alibi between the hours of yesterday morning and right now, Mr. Graham*, which always is annoying.

But sometimes, getting a delayed realization can always really, really suck.

Pork and fish, Will thinks absently as he soaps himself. *Pigs and fish and nothing vegetarian.*

Then he thinks: *Pigs and sounders. Elaborate dinner parties. Previous residence in Baltimore. Medical and surgical training. Physically fit and mentally sharp. Capable of blending in, of concealing his thoughts, of hunting.*

In his mind’s eye, he sees that great beast again, wings and antlers and a vicious smile, stalking prey in the darkness and bringing home food for his family, just like Hannibal brought Abigail out to hunt. He sees the pantry, perfectly innocuous, there to divert attention because of course Hannibal Lecter would have a massive pantry – but the pantry has a plush rug to muffle footsteps, has thick walls to stifle sound, and has a key that leads nowhere. He sees the Wound Man illustration, perfectly sketched, with a flourish at the bottom to spell out Hannibal’s name in elegant letters.

All serial killers want to be seen, Will remembers his professor saying. *They all want to be seen and admired and known, so they ensure there are unique signatures to their work.*

And what better way to be seen than to let a FBI agent in through the front door?

Hannibal could have hidden that illustration, he could have directed Will to the greenhouse for bait, he could have pretended he lived in Florida his whole life – but he didn’t. He sowed the seeds and spun the chrysalis and poked at the mind, and waited to see what would emerge.

Will twists the knob to turn off the shower, wraps a towel around his waist, and grabs his phone. One Google search brings up Hannibal Lecter of Baltimore.

Emergency room surgeon. Baltimore symphony opera board member. Consulting psychiatrist for the FBI.

The best way to hide is in plain sight, Will thinks.

One more Google search, and yep – Dr. Lecter closed up shop, bid his farewells, and moved out of town only one month after the final victim was found and declared to be one of the Ripper's many, many sounders. He'd even thrown a lavish dinner party to celebrate his departure from Baltimore society, and Will bets the menu for that night wasn't vegetarian either.

Pigs and sounders, Will thinks hysterically. *God, Hannibal, you absolute massive peacock.*

Will remembers getting his hands on the Ripper file. He'd questioned the use of the term "sounders" for the victims of the Ripper, and had been told a consultant psychiatrist had come with the label and it had stuck. Will had agreed, of course, but he'd been surprised that the revelation hadn't come from the FBI.

Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper.

The man Will has been ogling shamelessly and kind of wants to bang is the Chesapeake Ripper. The man who adopted Will's daughter is the Chesapeake Ripper. The man who *took a stroll through Will's brain* is the Chesapeake Ripper.

Will has been eating food served by the Chesapeake Ripper, and he's fairly certain the meat has not been from pigs.

"FML," Will says.

In any other situation, the way Hannibal visibly swallows when he takes in the sight of Will dripping wet and naked except for a towel would have done massive favors for Will's ego and libido.

Right now, though, Will is a little too angry to appreciate the fact that he's causing the most skilled, most camouflaged, and most dangerous serial killer in probably the entirety of American history to let the cracks show in his disguise at the mere sight of Will pretty much naked in his kitchen as he makes dinner.

Mostly because *he's the most skilled, most camouflaged, and most dangerous serial killer in probably the entirety of American history.*

"Will," Hannibal says after a long moment.

"Hannibal," Will says flatly.

Will can tell that Hannibal doesn't know, not quite yet. Ever since Will didn't have any startling realizations after the Wound Man, Hannibal must've relaxed a little bit. Not totally, because Hannibal is a massive paranoid, over-preparing serial killer, but enough. And, good lord, the confidence in Hannibal, to show a trained *FBI agent* who has *empathy* and *worked on the Ripper case* a blatant drawing of his own goddamn murder display.

Then again, Will hadn't noticed, so perhaps that's props to Hannibal.

"You are the Chesapeake Ripper."

Something changes in Hannibal's eyes. He seems no less aroused, but now the monster is beginning to show itself under his skin, the great beast that had haunted his hypnotism session and mantled his wings and roared his power to the heavens. Now, he isn't the mild-mannered doctor who loves Will's daughter. Now he's the mild-manner doctor who loves Will's daughter and has a knife in one hand and a pan in the other.

"And what are you going to do about that, Will?" Hannibal says softly. He must know there's no sense in lying, or maybe he's just that cocky.

"I should report you," Will says. He's shaking and he has no idea why. He can't tell if he's still angry, or relieved that he knows now, or terrified that he didn't before, that Hannibal tricked him for so long, that Hannibal practically gift-wrapped the truth and Will just smiled and swallowed it like a child. "You've killed, god, probably dozens of people. Certainly more than we've found. And certainly in more than one guise besides the Ripper. I bet people go missing here too in Florida. I bet you arrange little tableaus down here too. And I bet you feed your guests human flesh and call it pork or ham or chicken, just as you did in Baltimore."

Hannibal tilts his head. He still seems more curious than wary. "Not as many as you think. The meat can spoil, and I only serve the best. Sometimes I take no pork at all."

"How long have you been like this?"

"I am like nothing. I merely am."

"You made my daughter into a cannibal."

Hannibal says, "Do you consider yourself a cannibal for eating a hamburger? Or a banana? We aren't that different, genetically speaking. And yet they are not on our level. It is only cannibalism if we are equal. And those pigs could never even dream of being on the same level as our daughter."

"Don't," Will says. "Don't logic your way out of this. You killed a human and you tore out their flesh and you cooked it and you fed it to my daughter, *and you enjoyed it.*"

"As did you, if you'll recall," Hannibal points out mildly.

"Not the point! You made our daughter an accessory to murder! Do you know what the FBI would do to her? Never mind what they'll do to you, I'm sure you can just hide away in your

memory palace, but what about her?"

Hannibal puts the pan down, very, very slowly. The predator is still in his eyes, but now the coils of the snake aren't meant to prepare for striking; now they are coiled around something precious, something that must be shielded at all costs. "Abigail will never be convicted of my crimes," Hannibal says. "I did not adopt her and raise her to be my alibi or my partner in crime. She is our daughter, and I will never ever let her come to harm."

"Because her father being convicted of serial murder won't hurt her at all."

"Who says I would be convicted?"

You saw because I let you see, Hannibal's eyes whisper. *I let you see the Chesapeake Ripper lurking under my skin. And I did so in my home, in my territory, in my domain where I am king, and I don't need to let you live to tell the tale.*

Will's shaking ceases. He can see so clearly now, and clarity gives him the strength to stand tall. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Don't ask questions you already know the answers to."

And why would he? If Will even does muster up the guts to report him, who says they'll find any evidence? Even if they do, who says he'll be convicted? In fact, even if Jack did bust down the door with a SWAT team, who says Hannibal would still be here to be caught?

Or, even worse – maybe he would be here, maybe he would be caught, maybe he would be convicted. Will can see now that no prison on earth could ever contain Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal picks up the pan again and turns to return to his cooking. He leaves his back to Will, like Will isn't holding a bomb that could blow his tidy little life apart with one phone call. His voice entirely smooth, like they're discussing the weather, Hannibal asks, "Do I need to call my lawyer, Will?"

Will really, really wants to do something. Hit him, maybe. Or drag him to bed. One of the two.

There's a fine line between hatred and love.

"Yeah," Will says eventually, mouth as dry as the desert. "Yeah, you do."

Will didn't bring very much, mostly because he didn't figure he'd be staying very long and also because he actually doesn't own that much anyways. Somehow, though, most of his belongings have migrated around his guest room – the shirts on chairs and dressers, the pants are flung on the window seat, there some underwear in the bathroom – and so Will is only half-packed by the time he hears a tentative knock on his door.

He'd shut it, not because he had thought it would keep the Chesapeake Ripper out, but as a message to Hannibal, who would think barging in rather rude.

Still, Hannibal is not the only occupant of this house.

Will sighs, and goes to answer it. Sure enough, it's Abigail, who has a ceramic Tupperware container in one hand and a travel mug in the other, and a mildly confused expression that transforms into alarm when she sees the chaos in his room.

"Papa said you might want some food for the road," she says awkwardly. "Are you – are you leaving us?"

"Just . . . put it down. I'll take it with me."

Abigail does walk in and put down the probably-people-food on the table, but then she parks her butt in the chair and stares at him, eyes narrowed like she's trying to read his mind. Will is familiar with the expression because he's seen it in the mirror.

"You're leaving us," Abigail decides. "But why? I thought you and Papa were getting along."

The childish part of Will wants to blurt out *Yeah, I totally was on board with the sleep-with-Hannibal-train but then I discovered he was a cannibalistic serial killer and fed you human flesh and also fed me human flesh, and now I'm doubly mad because I sort of don't want to get off this train even though I know*, but he has no idea whether Abigail truly knows. Hannibal could've kept it from her, because if he could waltz into the FBI and consult on his own goddamn murder case, he certainly could fool his daughter.

"We had a disagreement," Will says eventually, grabbing yet another wayward set of pants and shoving them into his bag. "I thought it best not to wear out my welcome."

"Disagreement about what? I asked Papa but he didn't say."

So, you aren't running then, Will thinks, and his stomach fills with dread. Even for their daughter, Hannibal will not flee.

"About one of his hobbies."

Abigail blinks. "Which one? I don't think – "

"His butcher isn't quite as ethical as he led me to believe," Will interrupts. The more he delays leaving, the more likely Hannibal might decide to stifle the FBI investigation in other ways, and he's already proved willing and able to mess with Will's mind via hypnotism.

"Papa always checks," Abigail says. "He would only serve the best meat for me."

Will halts midway through picking up a shirt, and he wants to bang his head on the desk, or perhaps punch the wall, or just throw his head back and scream. God, how blind is he, to have missed not one but *two* cannibals in this house? Just because Hannibal didn't adopt Abigail to be his alibi or partner doesn't mean he would have left her in the dark about his murderous ways. He taught her to hunt, after all. He could've had a perfect legacy in her, in their perfect and beautifully innocent-looking daughter, so that the Chesapeake Ripper could live forever.

Will turns around. Abigail's face is entirely steady. This, apparently, was a calculated ambush, although he can tell Hannibal didn't put her up to it. She guessed, because apparently Will passed all of his own smarts in this arena and didn't retain any for himself.

"You know," Will says flatly.

"Papa taught me lock picking. It's a useful skill. One day I was playing outside and I spent three hours on the shed lock while he was inside composing."

"How old were you?'

Abigail shrugs. "I dunno. Pretty young. After that he demolished the shed and expanded the pantry."

Will regards his daughter. If she's smart enough to break into the Chesapeake Ripper's murder shed and figure out what Will realized, then she's smart enough to realize what Will is going to do next. He doesn't sense any inclination to fight from her and she carries no weapons, but then again – he didn't sense the murderer hiding within Hannibal either.

"When you researched me, did you find out what I do for a living?"

"Yeah. You catch killers."

"I catch killers for the FBI," Will emphasizes.

"Papa said if you could see him, it'd be worth the risk," Abigail replies. "He wanted to know what kind of man you were."

"Did he also factor in what would happen after I saw?"

"Papa has accounts all over the world. Even the FBI won't find all of them. And even if they did dig up some of the more obscure ones, they all name me as inheritor of the estate. Lady Abigail Lecter, at your service," she adds wryly, inclining her head as regally as anyone Will's ever seen. "And if you know what Papa can do, then you know he's made backup plans within backup plans and he's raised me to be a survivor. I will not be convicted."

Will already knows she wouldn't be. Hannibal has taught her the skill he perfected so well. She might never disown Hannibal, but she could cry tears and fake ignorance – and then turn around and use their holdings to ensure Hannibal could escape anytime he wanted and find sanctuary almost anywhere.

Abigail cocks her head. "Would you betray me, Dad?"

Will's throat closes up. Even knowing what Abigail has done, what she is doing now, what she'll do in the future, he knows with bone-deep certainty that he would never betray her. He would lie to Jack's face, to the FBI, even to a court that Abigail didn't know, she didn't help, she didn't have anything to do with the Ripper. He never knew that she existed a week ago and he never knew how much he'd want a daughter, but now he has her, and he would never give her up.

But it's somewhat of a moot question. Reporting Hannibal would betray her.

"We could live together," Abigail says carefully, slowly, her eyes never leaving her face. "Papa wouldn't mind you being with us. The house is big enough for your pack. You could work on boats again and never want for anything. You could have us."

How to make a fish take the bait when it has already seen hook inside the lure?

Make the lure something the fish can't resist.

And just like that, Will knows. "You were Hannibal's lure. Are. Is that how he taught you to hunt?"

"Papa doesn't like me hunting alone. He's overprotective that way." She pauses. "I still really suck at fishing though. Sorry. I suppose I'm better at stalking that luring."

A father-daughter Ripper team. Jack would absolutely go bananas over this.

"I was assigned to the Chesapeake Ripper case," Will says, just as slowly. "My boss is in actually in charge of it. It's his life's mission to catch the Ripper. And it's my job as a federal agent to report my suspicions."

To his surprise, Abigail grows a lot more alarmed at the idea of Will reporting Hannibal than she was at the idea of Will knowing the truth. "Would they take him away?"

"Um . . ."

"From here," Abigail clarifies. "From Florida."

"Most of the Ripper kills happened in Baltimore, so yeah, the trial would be held there."

"Wait no – no no no – you can't take Papa away from Florida," Abigail says, her tone as frantic as her eyes.

"I can't just not report – "

"It doesn't matter what you report, but they can't take Papa away from Florida," Abigail repeats. "He'll die if he goes back to Baltimore. Do you really think he'd just leave there on a whim after being camouflaged for so long?"

And she's got a point, but Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper. What could possibly kill him? "I don't think he has to worry about vendettas. He can take care of himself."

"Not against this." Abigail takes a big breath and stands up. Her posture is still pretty tense, but not in a fighting way, so Will just leans against the dresser to hear her out. He'd like to know what would make the Ripper's daughter scared. "Didn't Papa tell you? This – this house, this state – it's very close to the only source of magic in this world that Papa can access. Without it, the Darkness would consume his heart, and he'd be dead. Just a vegetable kept alive by machines."

Will has a very good BS meter. Just because he can't always make the connections about lies doesn't mean he can't see lies when they happen.

Abigail is not lying.

That being said, someone believing wholeheartedly in something is not the sole condition for absolute truth.

"I thought most kids stopped believing in magic when they learned Santa Claus wasn't real," Will says.

Abigail's mouth drops open. "He didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"I knew I sensed magic in the food, but I wasn't sure why, I thought he had told you," Abigail mutters frantically. "But if you're planning to report him . . ."

"Abigail," Will says firmly, a little lost. "Magic is not real. I promise you that. Hannibal may be the Chesapeake Ripper, but he is not magical. He's just a very smart and skilled person capable of evading law enforcement and blending in. Just as he taught you."

"He's the most powerful sorcerer in the world," Abigail says. "Trust me, magic is real. He doesn't need it to kill, he's smart enough to not need it."

"Isn't that what I just . . . never mind." Will reaches for the Tupperware container. It just has a little pie inside, which smells amazing, and when he pokes aside the edge of the crust, he glimpses what looks like apple and pork. Apparently Hannibal is so goddamn confident that he's giving Will *actual evidence*.

That, or he's hoping it guilt Will into eating it and giving up his entire life to live with them as a happy murder family.

It's games within games with Hannibal.

"Abigail, it's just an apple and pork pie," Will says. "And by pork I mean human flesh."

His stomach rumbles, because even knowing what is contained inside, Will is still hungry, and his stomach doesn't care that he'd probably be consuming human flesh. Hannibal is skilled enough to disguise it as pork, so he's certainly skilled enough to make it taste amazing. And he remembers how good the first meat pie Hannibal had served him tasted.

While he's distracted telling his stomach to shut up, Abigail marches up and snatches the pie straight out of the container in Will's hands.

"Apple's even worse," Abigail says, backing away. "Apple has always been in magic, and never for good things."

"Abigail – Abigail, give it to me. It's just a pie. Granted, it has human flesh, but there's no magic," Will tells her. "If anything Hannibal's more likely to just poison me than try to, I

don’t know, curse me.”

Abigail halts with her back to the wall. She looks very scared now, and Will has no idea why, but she also looks very determined, so his legs are already starting to position him to sprint forward when she opens her mouth, because he knows what she’s going to do, and god, if there is any poison in there, he’d rather eat it than let Abigail suffer for her parents’ mistakes.

“Fine, I’ll prove magic is real,” Abigail declares, and she takes a big bite of the pie.

By the time Will has caught up and yanked the pie away, she’s chewed her mouthful and swallowed. But nothing happens.

“See?” Will says. “No magic.”

Then he lifts the pie up the light and prays Hannibal didn’t actually poison it. He didn’t think Hannibal would – he actually thinks Hannibal would relish the challenge of being greeted by a SWAT team that had tested his little apple and pork pie – but he’s been wrong about Hannibal before.

A thud distracts him from his musings.

Abigail is collapsed on the floor, eyes closed, body prone, fingers limp. If he didn’t know better he’d think she was dead, but no poison works that fast without telltale signs, and she looks like she’s just sleeping.

But Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper and a genius.

“Abigail!” Will shouts, and runs to her. He shakes her and shakes her and shakes her, but there’s no response.

“ABIGAIL!”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 3 = We finally find out who Abigail's mother is, and Hanni and Will take a nice little road trip to find her.

A/N: I again apologize for this really, really, really long chapter, I promise it was NOT intentional. Also yes, people in the Once Upon A Time show really did just fall on the ground once poisoned. Dramatically fall, but honestly just sorta "plop" and they were down for the count.

Finally, lemme know who you think Abigail's mom is! I won't spoil it, so if you want to know if your guess is right please DM me so we can chat XD, but I am super curious if

I've made it like way super obvious or if I have been a Good Mystery AuthorTM.

the perils of love

Chapter Summary

> The peril of love is that sometimes you don't know how true it is until you're asked to prove it.

Chapter Notes

> Oh hi again. What's that, you thought chapter 3 would be shorter? WELL HANNIBAL DECIDED AGAINST THAT. AKA welcome to my 23k monstrosity of a chapter. I am truly and deeply very sorry.
>
> Aside from that, my only note is that when you read about Hannibal's Dark One form, picture it kinda like his wendigo form with leathery dragon wings, not the fluffy and feathery kind you see in Good Omens or Supernatural or Maleficient. That is all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once upon a time, a teenager went to the greatest sorcerer in the world, and she begged him to take her on as his apprentice. The sorcerer had taught many students in his long, long life, but he knew that he was reaching the end of his life and so he refused her request. She pleaded and she cried and she screamed, but still he refused.

And so the teenager waited.

And waited.

And waited.

And finally, on the seventh day, when the sorcerer left his house to find the teenager kneeling outside of his door as she had for all of those days, silent due to her hoarse throat and red-eyed due her tears, he sighed and knelt before and offered her water. He urged her to move on, for he had taught many students who had become masters in their own right and any number of them might be willing to take her on.

The teenager refused. She would learn from him and him alone, or she would die waiting.

And so the greatest sorcerer in the world stood and lifted her on her feet and declared that she would be his last apprentice, for this sorcerer had the power of foresight, and he knew

that the appearance of this teenager begging him to teach her would be the herald of his rapidly approaching death.

Even those who are immortal can fear death, after all.

The teenager learned well and quickly. Within hours, she could light torches and turn water to ice. Within days, she could coax seeds to grow into saplings and weather stone into dust with a touch. Within weeks, she could teleport as fast a thought and raise walls powerful enough to hold back armies.

When at last the teenager was strong enough to hold her own against the sorcerer in a duel, never flagging and never surrendering, he declared her a master, and told her that he had prepared a parting gift just for her.

So the sorcerer led the teenager to a cottage he built just for her. It was made of a massive tree, one that the sorcerer had sung to every day without fail since he had been a boy, all those centuries ago. The roots of the tree served as the foundation of the cottage; the branches were its rooms; and deep inside, a hollow that glowed with red fire served as its hearth. The hollow was just large enough to fit a person, and it was covered by a door woven of a thousand different flowers, perfectly preserved and kept vibrant by daily watering with the sorcerer's own blood.

And the sorcerer told her that when the time was right, this cottage would be her escape – and his grave.

The teenager, of course, had never told the sorcerer why she wished to learn magic, why she had come so far to find him, why she had been on the run for so many, many years.

But she did not have to. The sorcerer had been born with the power of foresight, and he had known the day of his death since the day of his birth. He had always known that this was where he would die, and – having taught his final and greatest apprentice – he was now ready to die for her.

Sure enough, only days later, the skies overhead darkened, and the winds howled, and the very earth trembled beneath their feet.

And the sorcerer and the teenager knew that the Darkness had come.

For the last time, the sorcerer took up his staff and his robes and his hat, and he walked to the cottage arm-in-arm with the teenager, and he savored his last sight of the sun, his last breath of the air, his last drenching in the rain. He hugged his student for the last time, and he kissed her on the forehead, and he bid her to flee through the hollow, where she would be safe for as long as the sorcerer could give her.

And the teenager cried, but through her tears she bid her teacher farewell, for she knew what must be done. She opened the door of flowers, and she let her blood drip into the hearth to light the fires, and she stepped through the doorway into a new world.

The sorcerer, meanwhile, laid his back against the door of flowers, and then he began to sing, singing to the branches and the roots and the flowers, and they came alive at his call, for he had picked them and grown them and nurtured them, and so they honored his last request, even as his song began to grow shakier and softer and painful the longer he sang. But he knew what must be done, and so still he sang.

By the time the Darkness blew down the door to the cottage, the song was done.

When the Darkness laid eyes on the sorcerer, he saw only an old, frail man, panting and bleeding. The Darkness demanded for the sorcerer to give up the teenager, but the sorcerer merely laughed. The doorway in the hearth was closed forever, the sorcerer said, for he had sung himself into the hollow of tree where the hearth once stood – the branches had grown into his arms and the roots had grown into his legs and the door of flowers was now nothing more like a gentle blanket over his chest. The doorway had been meant for one person and one person only, and the sorcerer had sealed it with his own body. There was no undoing of what had been done, now and forever, and both the sorcerer and the Darkness knew it.

The sorcerer was the greatest in the world, after all, and this had been his final and most important task, and he had thus devoted everything that he was to seeing the task done.

And the Darkness raged, and tore out the sorcerer's throat.

And in that new world, although separated by space and time, the teenager cried out in agony and grief and fury, for she knew that her teacher had died to protect her.

The cries drew strangers, from far and from near, to come to the teenager's aid. They picked her up and they brought her home and they gave her hot soup and soft blankets. Even the king himself came to see her, this maiden who had fallen from the sky and cried tears that shimmered like diamonds in the sunlight, and offer his assistance.

The king asked for her name, and the teenager wiped at her eyes, and took up the name of her fallen teacher in his honor.

And so that night the Once and Future King of Camelot announced the appointment of his new sorcerer, who would henceforth be known as Merlin.

Perhaps driven by curiosity or concern over what Abigail would do, Hannibal ends up coming up the stairs and into Will's room seconds after Abigail collapses. He freezes at the sight he comes across, Will screaming Abigail's name and shaking her frantically, and Abigail cold and still as death on the ground. It takes several moments before Will is even aware that Hannibal is there, and by then, Hannibal is almost to their side.

Sometimes, Will's empathy is like a turtle: slow and steady, all the way until the end, picking up details here and making observations there, until finally they cross the finish line and Will gets to see them cuff the perp.

Other time, his empathy is like a rabbit: lightning fast, bounding from thought to thought, drawing a map of connections within a few leaps until the entire messy picture is his to see.

Right now, Will is a rabbit.

He lets go of Abigail and turns on Hannibal, rage blooming in his chest, as fierce and savage as though he'd raised Abigail all along. He can read the emotions in Hannibal's face – surprise, confusion, understanding, anger, resignation – almost as quickly as they pass his face, but they all make Will angrier, for to have confusion followed so quickly by understanding can mean only one thing: *Hannibal did this to their daughter*.

And maybe the Chesapeake Ripper has killed plenty of people, maybe he's evaded cops and law enforcement, maybe he's an unparalleled fighter and strategist, but right now the blinders have been washed away from Will, and he's more than a match for Hannibal.

He reads every movement, every twitch, every impulse, and he counters every single one so that he can grab Hannibal goddamn Lecter by the collar and slam him against the wall.

"You did this!" Will shouts, and he barely even recognizes his own voice.

Hannibal, as ever, remains calm. "Let me go, Will."

"You did this to our daughter!"

"Will, let me go and help Abigail – "

Will feels it, feels the way Hannibal shifts his legs for better stability and attempts to bring his arms up to push Will away, because right now he *is* Hannibal, his mind and eyes and empathy blown wide open to allow him to see the monster under the person suit, and so he stomps on Hannibal's foot to pin it down and uses one of his hands to pin Hannibal's wrist to the wall, high above his head where it's no threat to Will.

As for his other hand, well – he uses that to get a nice, tight grip around Hannibal's throat, and then he starts to *squeeze*.

"You put poison in that apple and pork pie that you meant for me," Will snarls, "and Abigail ate it."

Hannibal's pupils expand at Will's words until darkness swallows his eyes, and at first Will thinks it's a reaction either to his words or the fact that Will is cutting off Hannibal's air supply with his hand.

At the next second, though, he finds out just how wrong he is.

Hannibal flings Will away from him with a violent roar that makes the entire house shake, and Will slams into the wall on the opposite side of the room hard enough to drive almost all of the breath from his lungs. And when he looks up, dazed and still quite angry, the sight of Hannibal takes away the remaining air.

Because Hannibal is a literal maelstrom of rage, darkness and lightning and ice swirling together, turning the floor hard and cold and filling the room with bright flashes of fire even as the very sunlight dies as soon as it touches Hannibal's ever-growing shadow. Will watches, mouth agape, as giant ebony wings unfold from Hannibal's back, ragged and sharp, and giant

antlers poke through to stretch towards the sky, bloody and jagged. As he walks forward to Abigail, the maelstrom picks up the chairs, the dresser, the rugs, the table, the bed sheets, everything that is in his path, and the whirlwind sends it flying around the room. Will even has to duck a table, but the closer Hannibal comes the harder it gets to resist the winds threatening to flatten him so much that he becomes a bloody smear on the wall.

Then Hannibal touches one clawed black finger to Abigail's chin, and just like that, the whirlwind stops.

Everything falls to the floor in a series of thuds and thumps, and as Hannibal rises from where he had knelt to check Abigail, Will can see how he begins to put himself back together. The lightning flashes fewer and fewer times, the ice begins to melt, and the darkness recedes to allow the sunlight to reenter the room without being extinguished.

Hannibal still remains an unnaturally tall figure of skin as black as night with ebony wings and bloody antlers though.

And just like that, Will is a rabbit again, heart beating double time as his mind pulls the threads together to reach one terrifying conclusion: *Abigail was not lying about Hannibal and the magic.*

Will clears his throat, because he knows better than to let Hannibal open the door to this conversation. "So you do have magic."

One of Hannibal's wings jerks, almost like a dismissive twitch. "Yes."

"Abigail said she sensed magic in the food. Magic poison?"

"Of a kind." Hannibal clasps his hands together, and it's so strange, because his claws are long enough to disembowel Will in a single swipe. "The sleeping curse is the oldest of the spells in my repertoire, and there are two traditional methods of delivery: an apple dipped in poison and a spindle tipped with poison. I chose the apple."

Will pushes himself to his feet. If they're going to have a conversation about magic and curses and . . . well, whatever Hannibal is, he's going to have it sitting down in a chair.

"And here I thought you were just going to kill me," Will says.

"Why would I do that?"

If Will is a dog person, favoring loyalty and fluffy cuddles and exuberant greetings at the door, Hannibal is definitely a cat person, favoring independence and cunning and choosing to bestow the honor of his company when he chooses. He also likes to hunt and play with his food apparently.

"You'd want to continue playing with me," Will realizes.

"It is said that those who fall under a sleeping curse are not always asleep. Or rather, their bodies may lie in slumber, but their minds wander an endless corridor of flame and darkness.

If one has access to poppy dust, one may even speak to those wandering minds without falling prey to the curse."

Will sighs. Of course Hannibal would want more time to rifle through Will's mind, and never mind that said rifling would occur in the shared experience of a magical coma. "And how long would you keep me asleep?"

"As long as it took. I have the power to keep you alive for as long as I wish," Hannibal says solemnly. "Who knows? Perhaps if I let you slumber for a century or two before waking you again, your opinions on my activities might have changed, and we could have lived together happily as a family."

"Abigail said you were the greatest sorcerer in the world," Will says, because he'd rather not imagine waking up with a century having passed in his sleep. "Who are you?"

"I've gone by many names. The fairy godfather of a peasant girl dreaming of a prince; the relentless crocodile who swallowed whole a pirate's hand; the mysterious stranger who taught a miller's daughter to spin gold from straw." Hannibal shakes himself, rather like a dog shedding water after a swim, and the black wings fold in and the antlers shrink down. Now, he appears as nothing more than tall man with eyes swallowed up by the dark of night. "But my true name is Hannibal, and I am the Dark One."

"Right. I don't suppose you're going to be able to break the curse on Abigail, then?"

Will knows the answer before Hannibal even begins to shake his head. If Hannibal could have broken the curse, he would have.

"The sleeping curse is very old and very powerful. To break something born of such dark magic requires an act of immense light magic, and it is beyond my capabilities, because as far I know, Abigail did not have any suitors who might fit the bill."

Will sighs and lets himself slump in the chair. He had been afraid of that answer. Will might never have been one for romance, but he knows of true love's kiss. Apparently even as powerful as Hannibal is, he cannot force someone to fall in love, and usually in every story with a sleeping curse, there has to be a prince in love to wake the sleeping princess. And this world is a little short on princes.

"So then," Will asks, "what are we going to do?"

There's a long pause, and it's only made worse by the fact that Will knows without having to look that Hannibal has something to say. It's probably eloquent and long-winded and chock full of metaphors, but Will's kind of out of patience, so he just rolls his head around to squint at Hannibal.

"Spit it out, Hannibal."

"I may not know a way," he says, very slowly, as though picking his words like they're steps through a field of lava, "but I might know someone who does."

“So why haven’t you called them over?”

Will has never seen Hannibal’s emotionally constipated face before. It’s stupidly endearing on the man Will knows to be a ruthless and sadistic serial murderer who likes to cook human flesh to serve to his ignorant guests.

“Let me guess: they won’t have anything to do with you. What did you do to them, exactly?”

“She was the last apprentice of Merlin, the first and greatest of the sorcerers of light magic,” Hannibal answers. “I killed her teacher.”

“You – of course you did,” Will groans. “And great, I guess the legend of King Arthur is real now too.”

“Hmm. The legend of King Arthur is one your world created. In my world, we had fairies and giants; your world had nothing, until Merlin’s apprentice came here, and forged a king a sword and a grail as gifts. And Merlin was known to us, but since your world had no magic, no one protested when his last apprentice took up the name in his honor.”

Will snorts. “Because you have no magic at all.”

“I am different. I am brought magic with me, just as she – Merlin – did. If I’d been born in your world, I would have been a regular man, just like you.”

And because this is starting to be more revelations about the way the world works than Will normally receives on an average day – magic and King Arthur and multiple universes – Will decides to shelve his more hysterical questions for later. He can save the freak out for when Abigail is awake, and then . . . and then, well, he can decide what to do about Hannibal being the Chesapeake Ripper.

“I assume Merlin 2.0 doesn’t answer your calls, so let’s skip that part about your terrible social skills and get to the part where I say: how are we going to find her?”

“It will be difficult. I have been searching for Merlin for hundreds of years.” Hannibal pauses, and then he gives Will an assessing stare that travels up and down his body. It’s different from when Hannibal gazed at him naked and when he watched him wrestle with whether to tell Jack; now, it’s all cool judgement, like a teacher looking at a pupil and finding them wanting. “But we are in your world now, and Merlin and I both have learned to blend in, so perhaps the assistance of a regular human like yourself will be useful.”

Will is silent through the entire elaborate ritual of Hannibal getting the pantry key, unlocking the door that opens in the mirror of the pantry, and descending into the bowels of a basement that Will bets isn’t on any blueprint of this house, but he can’t hold himself back when he sees the blinding white walls of the murder basement where the Ripper harvests his victims.

“God, could you have picked a brighter shade of white? I feel like I’m about to go blind.”

“People have expectations for someone like me. And besides, it’s far easier to clean blood off of white walls than black ones.”

They go past a surgical table with fifty million restraints on it, several large freezers, a cabinet with what Will guesses are decorations for his murder displays, and a shower before they come to yet another mirror. Hannibal brings his hands to cup over his mouth and then he exhales, his breath tinged with sparks and flames. The mirror responds by liquefying until it resembles more of a ripping pool than a solid mirror, and soon Will can make out the blurry outlines of another room beyond the mirror.

“Follow me,” Hannibal says, and he steps right through the mirror like the goddamn phantom of the opera.

And because Will is apparently Christine in this scenario, he sighs and follows.

The room beyond the mirror is shockingly simple compared to the stark cold elegance of the murder basement and the sumptuous opulence of the upper floors. It has plain rock walls and a plain dirt floor, and the only thing in it is a giant rock and a cup balanced carefully on top. The rock has a single crack in the top and the cup is plain wood, but so beautifully polished that it glows like it’s made of gold.

Will stares. “Is that – ”

“Yes, this is the stone from whence King Arthur drew Excalibur,” Hannibal says casually. “Merlin blocked her blood connection to me, so I have been trying to utilize these items instead. She imbued Excalibur and the Grail with her magic and her soul to bring them to life, but tracking her through them is an . . . imprecise art. They always remember where she birthed them and they always attempt to return there – but she is no longer there. Camelot crumbled a long, long time ago, and now is only dust and ash and rocks under the sea.”

“Did you destroy that too?”

“Me? No. That was simple human folly, combined with your kind’s tendency to declare war over the simplest of slights.”

While Will digests this latest insult towards humanity, Hannibal pulls out a globe from thin air, with shimmering golden lines outlining all of the countries. He then pulls out a knife and casually pricks a vein in his wrist, allowing his blood to drip into the Grail. It’s kind of surreal to see bright red blood, the same as any human, falling from Hannibal’s wrists, given that his eyes are still pools of endless night.

“So, uh, how does . . . this work?” Will asks, wanting to get closer but also wary of the knife Hannibal still holds.

“Merlin is my sister. The blood that flows in her veins came from the same wellspring that mine did. I know where I am, so I merely need to see where else my blood flows, and then I will know where she is.”

“ . . . It sounds pretty simple, so I’m guessing Merlin 2.0 blocked you?”

“Yes. The blood location spell is among the easiest. But when she ran from me, she sealed our connection; I still to this day am not sure how. Thus I rely on assistance from the Grail, which she made and carried in her possession for years, to get me a closer guess as to her location. For years I used the rock of Excalibur, but the Grail she carried until fairly recently, so it is more accurate.”

“Why not Excalibur itself?’

Hannibal smiles tightly. “Isn’t it obvious? She still has Excalibur with her. I only came into possession of the Grail by pure chance, in some house when I passed by on my way for hunt. At first I thought I was just sensing the party, so many humans clustered together, but later I realized it was more than that, and when I returned, I found the Grail amongst a pile of those red plastic cups you humans favor so much.”

“She left it behind?”

“I must assume so. She has run from me for so long; I think it very unlikely she would deliberately leave it.”

And damn it, Will’s empathy still works on Hannibal, monstrous magical being or not. He feels the hollow in Hannibal’s chest that longs for its missing part. It isn’t painful, precisely, but he can’t stop scratching at it, like how one might struggle to remember a dream as it fades away. It’s not all that dissimilar for Will’s childish longings to meet his mother.

“Now, then,” Hannibal says briskly, taking his hand away and healing the wound with an absent gesture. “Please stay very still, Will, so that nothing bad happens to you.”

Will remembers the terrible maelstrom Hannibal had summoned, and swallows. “Noted.”

Hannibal takes his shimmering globe of glowing lines and he sets it on the rock as well, so that the Grail filled his blood is inside it. Then he places both hands on it, closes his eyes, and breathes.

In the corner of his eye, Will sees the beast – from his dreams, from his therapy session, from his nightmares – in the great wings that unfold from Hannibal’s back and the antlers that arch up from Hannibal’s head. Somehow, he had already seen that true form, and he has no idea how.

The globe begins to spin and spin and spin underneath Hannibal’s hand, and a droplet of blood rises from the Grail to land on the globe. As the globe’s spin slows, the droplet wanders all over, jumping from continent to continent, before it finally settles in the outline of America. Finally, when Hannibal opens his eyes, the globe comes to a complete rest, with the droplet lazily wandering around what looks like Canada.

“That is the closest I’ve been able to get,” Hannibal says, sounding a tad frustrated. “But no further. And I cannot search all of Canada for her. This is where you come in.”

Will waits for a second, but then it becomes clear that’s all Hannibal intends to say.

“Okay, if you want me to hunt down your sister human-style,” Will says eventually, “this human is going to need more details. Like what she looks like.”

“I have no idea. It’s been a long, long time. And with magic, she could look like anyone.”

“What was she last wearing?”

“Blue sorcerer’s robes, akin to her teacher. But she shed those before she even left Camelot’s court.”

Will runs a hand through his hair. It’s hard to really get angry – if Hannibal is telling the truth, and Will senses he is, then, yeah, a sibling who’s been gone for centuries is kind of hard to describe after the fact. But he still needs something. His empathy and police training are useless if they’re looking for a blank slate. “Give me a name, at least. I know she might have changed it, but I need *something*, Hannibal.”

Those great ebony wings flex and mantle, as if they have minds of their own and wish to cradle their owner within them. Hannibal takes a deep breath.

“Her name – her true name, before she became Merlin of Camelot – was Mischa.”

Will freezes.

“You can call me anything you like,” laughs the girl in red. “Mary or Mia or Mariah.”

Will coaxes, “Just tell me your name. Your real name.”

“It’ll be our little secret,” whispers the girl. “You can keep a secret, can’t you, William Graham?”

“Will?”

“My true name,” says the girl, soft as a leaf falling from a tree, mouth as close to Will’s ear as she can get, “is Mischa. Can you keep that a secret?”

“Will? Are you alright?”

“Of course I can,” Will promises.

The girl watches with golden eyes as he drinks deeply from the wooden cup she offers him, thirsty from their dancing. The water is fresh and sharp in his mouth, and it drives the alcoholic fog clear from his mind. The last thing he remembers is falling back onto the bed, still naked, still loose limbed from orgasm, and still clutching the cup in his fingers.

“I know you will, William Graham,” the girl says. “Now sleep, and awaken refreshed, and forget me.”

“Will!”

The shout startles Will so much he jumps backwards and slams painfully into the rock wall. Suddenly he understands exactly why he doesn't remember the night with Abigail's mother in full, why Hannibal could not bring the memories forward, and why Abigail's birth certificate has his name but not her mother's.

He looks up into Hannibal's eyes, and he *understands*.

"I know what Mischa looks like," Will says hoarsely. "I know what aliases she might use. And . . . And I know how to convince her to speak with you."

The look on Hannibal's face is priceless. Will would laugh if he wasn't so busy panicking.

Hannibal's desire to speak to his sister burns within him, an eternal flame that has powered him through the long centuries without her, always moving forward, always searching, always hunting. For Will to offer an end to that hunt makes Hannibal – experienced and wary and powerful as he is – as tempted as the first humans in Eden.

That does not mean, however, that Hannibal is made any less clever by such a temptation.

Hannibal's eyes narrow as his wings expand, stretching towards the ceiling. It's like a cat puffing up their fur to appear bigger. "You have met her." A statement, not a question.

"Yeah." Will blows out a long breath. "I um. I know why you haven't been able to dig out the memories of Abigail's mother."

And, well. He's never seen Hannibal shocked before, but it's truly quite impressive. His mouth parts open a tiny sliver, his wings fall out of their mantling, and even his antlers droop a little bit. The blackness even recedes from his eyes, leaving him as just a regular old human shocked at the news of who is related to whom.

Hannibal even forgets to pretend that he totally didn't mess with Will's mind with magic during the therapy business.

"You," he says. "You . . ."

"Mischa is Abigail's mother," Will says, as quickly as he can, like ripping out a knife from a wound so a doctor can begin to properly stem the flow of blood. "I met her and slept with her, and she must have . . . done something, so that way I wouldn't remember her name or who she was. It explains why Abigail's birth certificate has a father but no mother; usually it's the other way around."

It might explain some other things too.

"You never wanted children," Will continues, letting the part of him that absorbed Hannibal loose. "But someone prompted you – maybe they mocked you for only fostering the killing instinct in those you saw had the seeds, as opposed to planting them yourself – and so you went out and found a child to raise. You didn't plan to ever show them your magic, you just wanted a child to raise in your image and then set loose upon the world as soon as they were an adult and you could resume your magical lifestyle, but then you found Abigail, and she

must have shone with magical potential. And so you chose you, and you raised her, and then suddenly she was the most important thing in your life, and you didn't mind showing her magic, and would you look at that? She could do magic as well."

Hannibal's lips draw back; he might like the idea of Will's empathy, but apparently not so much as a weapon to pull apart the stitching of his person suit and glimpse inside him. But he remains calm all the same. "I did not think much of it, at the time. Your world has no magic, but so did mine once upon a time. We found a way to channel it through our emotions. And Abigail was born here, in Florida, in the heart of the magic I brought into your world with me. I assumed she was merely born in the right place at the right time."

Then Hannibal is striding forward, eyes set and determined, and Will scrambles backwards to get out of his way because he really doesn't want to be murdered right now. But Hannibal continues to follow him, and he even flaps his wings and makes a little leap to cut off Will's escape back into the house.

"I need your blood, Will," Hannibal says impatiently, grabbing at his arm with one suddenly clawed hand. "I've already shown you the power of the blood connection spell, and since I know where you are and where Abigail is, I can find out where Mischa is."

Will still flinches when Hannibal goes at him with the knife, though, because of course *now* is when his self-preservation instincts decide to kick in.

Hannibal directs the stream of blood that flows from Will's wound to fly through the air and land neatly in the Grail. Then he gently runs a finger down the wound and heals it. While Will brings his hand up to stare suspiciously at his unblemished skin, Hannibal flaps his wings and just vanishes in a puff of black clouds.

"What the hell," Will says.

Before he even finishes speaking, Hannibal is back in another puff of clouds, and he has a floating red ball. Which, Will realizes as he squints, is actually a magical container of blood. Abigail's, he presumes.

Hannibal efficiently conjures the glowing globe again, adds Abigail's blood to the Grail, and then does his little ritual.

This time, when a single droplet rises to run along the globe, it makes a little isosceles triangle. There's two points in Florida – where Will and Abigail are – and then the blood droplet travels up a long side until it reaches a point in what looks like Alaska.

Mischa.

Will looks between Hannibal's drooping wings, which have sagged so hard they now are lying half on the floor, and the red point where Mischa has chosen to hide out, and has to restrain himself from laughing again. "She really picked the farthest place she could get from you while still being the US, huh."

“She must have realized that I am loathe to move too far away from Florida,” Hannibal says with a sigh. “Even if I had searched Canada, I would not have gone so far north and west.”

Will coughs politely. “You uh. You can put away those wings, right? Only I don’t think they’ll fit on a plane.”

“We are *not* flying.”

“Hannibal, that’s like a five day drive. And that’s if we switch off.”

“I know how to drive. Failing to learn to keep up with humanity’s ever changing technology is how one ends up standing out.”

“What have you got against flying?” Will demands, because if he’s going to suffer through five days trapped in a tiny car with Hannibal goddamn Lecter, he’s damn well going to know the truth. And have Hannibal say it out loud using his words instead of making Will dig around in his person suit for it.

Hannibal’s jaw works. It’s the first time he’s seen Hannibal at a loss for words.

It’s a big day for firsts with Hannibal.

“I can fly, with my wings,” Hannibal says slowly. “And I can teleport with magic. I find it . . . supremely . . . uncomfortable . . . to travel using methods of metal and machinery, when I can just move myself to a place with a thought.”

“And we can’t teleport because . . . ?”

“The reach of my influence is limited. To travel beyond Florida is beyond the reach of my magic, and the further I go, the weaker I shall become. In Alaska I’ll be lucky if I can so much as light a cigarette with my magic.”

Will runs this to his Hannibal-to-human translator and comes up with: *Leaving the seat of my power and influence will weaken me, and I’ll end up becoming more and more like a regular human the further we go, and I hate being weak, and I especially hate being weak in front of* humans *and so we are going to do this road trip via car because at least it’ll only be you who sees me at my weakest*.

“You can put up with life’s little petty indignities for five days, Hannibal,” Will tells him. “Now pack a bag. The faster we get in the car, the faster we can return and wake Abigail up.”

Hannibal packs his bag via magic, because of course he does. Will walks upstairs to say good-bye to Abigail while dodging various clothing and shoes and grooming items as they float down their way down to the second floor. Hannibal is only taking one bag, like Will, because his bag bespelled to be bottomless and weightless. Which makes sense – he can’t imagine Hannibal Lecter ever embarking on a week-long trip with only one bag.

When Will reaches Abigail’s room, he finds that Hannibal has changed her into her white nightgown and folded her hands over her chest like she’s awaiting a kiss from a prince. He’s

even sung flowers into existence around the border of her bed.

“You got experience with this?” Will asks, half to taunt Hannibal and half because he is genuinely curious.

Hannibal takes a step back and then lowers himself to kneel on the ground, tapping his fingers on the ground to make a golden line burn itself around Abigail’s bed. “No. But I am not unfamiliar with Maleficient and Queen Grimhilde; the line of the Dark One traces back to the beginning of time itself.”

“Do I want to know how old you are?”

“Probably not. I myself have no idea. The passage of time means something different when you are immortal.”

“Great.” Will takes a step forward, and then eyes the burning golden line. Protection, he assumes. “Can I say good-bye, at least?”

“It will not stop you. You are Abigail’s father as much as I am. No ward of mine will exclude you.”

So Will continues to walk forward and sure enough, when he crosses the golden line he feels a strange sort of heat pass through him, but it remains pleasant rather than painful, and he is able to sit on the side of the bed and touch Abigail’s hand. She’s surprisingly warm for someone who looks dead.

We’ll find Mischa, Will thinks. *We’ll find your mother and a cure and then we’ll wake you up. I promise you.*

After that, he has no more words to say to Abigail – to his daughter, two days into his company and one day into a magical coma – so he just pats awkwardly at her hand and then stands and retreats. He imagines Hannibal will also want to say good-bye before they take off for Alaska.

Hannibal steps forward too, and he also clasps her hand, tight enough that if she were awake she’d likely complain, before he leans down to press their foreheads together.

Finally, after a long moment, he straightens and slowly waves his hand from her feet up to her head. Underneath his palm, diamonds sparkle into existence in the path of his hand, and then as he makes a fist, the diamonds multiply one by one until suddenly there are hundreds of them joined together, glowing in the sun and encircling Abigail in a perfectly shaped cover of diamond.

“Wasn’t it a glass coffin for Snow White?” Will comments as Hannibal walks towards him and leaves the room.

“You would have to ask her. We were present in that story, but not when the prince awoke her. However, I thought it best to adhere to at least the spirit of the sleeping curse, if not its letter.”

Then Hannibal closes the door. He snaps off the doorknob, making Will jump at the sharp sound, and then he presses his hand flat to the door. It begins to ripple, slowly at first but then faster, until the ripples encompass the entire door. When Hannibal removes his hand, the ripples begin to slow again, and Will realizes he's looking at a mirror, just like the mirror that guards Hannibal's secret room within his murder basement. The only difference is that this mirror has one tiny piece missing, and when Will turns to Hannibal he sees that the doorknob has turned into a shard of glass.

Hannibal notices Will's look and explains, "This shard will be the key to the mirror. Without it, no one can enter the room."

"Doesn't Abigail's room have a window?"

"Yes and no. I have set her room within the world of the mirror I just made – a pocket universe, if you want a more scientific explanation. This mirror is the only entrance. To make another entrance, you would need to shatter my enchantments; and even if they did, I have laid even more spells to defend Abigail, so they wouldn't make it pass the doorway."

Sometimes, Will reflects, Hannibal's tendency to go overboard actually does come in handy.

Will looks around and realizes that there are no more items floating downstairs to be packed into Hannibal's enchanted bag. Time to go then.

"I've got everything I need in the car. Are you ready?"

"I just need to lock the front door."

Locking the front door apparently involves Hannibal closing the door and saying, quite politely, "We are leaving now."

"Have a nice journey," says the door.

Will nearly falls off the porch.

"Let no one inside until we return. Take any and all measures to defend our daughter."

"Understood. The house will await your return."

That apparently done, Hannibal turns and walks away towards the car at a brisk pace. He's actually halfway down the path before Will manages to pick his jaw off the ground and start running to catch up, and even then, he doesn't get to Hannibal until the man is basically getting into the car. They're taking Hannibal's, mostly because Will decided to save his energy for another battle and also because Hannibal's car is bigger.

"Your house talks," Will says blankly.

"So can a smart house. What is your point?"

“Yeah, but you don’t have a smart house. I mean, you have high tech computers and incredibly advanced kitchenware, but that’s not the same thing.”

Hannibal looks impatient. “I built this house from the ground up, Will. That means a lot of my magic went into it. And I am one of the most powerful sorcerers in my world, never mind yours. Therefore, when I put a lot of my magic into something, it often takes more effort to make it simple than to make it complicated. On top of that, I have lived in this house for a long time; it has grown used to absorbing my magic. Now it is . . . somewhat sentient. Can we start this drive now?”

Will pauses before sliding into the car. “Did you build the car too?”

“No.” Then, because he apparently enjoys riling Will up as much as Will likes to rile up Hannibal, he waits until Will has buckled himself in before he continues, “But I did augment it over the years.”

“Okay, 1) I don’t want to know what your sentient magical house will do to any poor guy who tries to knock, and 2) if your car eats me, it’s going to be really difficult to use my blood to find Mischa.”

“I have a perfect memory,” Hannibal says dismissively as he starts the car. “I memorized her location.”

And on that comforting note, they pull out of the driveway.

Since Hannibal seems content to drive in silence, Will pulls out his laptop and starts going through his e-mails. There are a *lot*, ranging from a confirmation from HR about his family emergency vacation and a thoughtful “hope you’re okay” from Alana, who is covering his classes, to the standard panicked student “is there extra credit in this class” plea that Will automatically deletes and a really big and capitalized e-mail from Jack.

Will opens the images without reading Jack’s no doubt furious commentary, and finds himself staring at a mushroom garden.

A mushroom garden made of humans.

Will sighs. Apparently he can’t even take half a week off before the crazies return.

When he enlarges the image so that he can get a better look, Hannibal takes notice. He doesn’t take his hands off the wheel, at least, but he does glance over and Will can read the interest emanating from him in waves.

“Some guy apparently made a mushroom garden of his victims,” Will explains absently. It’s not like Hannibal is going to do anything about it right now, and he doesn’t think Hannibal’s the gardening type. At least, not this type of gardening; if Hannibal had made a mushroom garden of his victims, he would have made it incredibly neat and organized with color arrangements and a moat around the edges.

Hannibal hums. “Interesting. How did he colonize it?”

Will squints at the image, and then opens up the caption of comments from the forensic team. “Looks like it was a bunch of wild spores, so basically with whatever landed.”

“So not for food, then.”

“Not everyone who murders does so to fill their pantries, Hannibal,” Will says in exasperation.

“Are you sure it was murder? I do not see any signs of a struggle.”

“He probably drugged them.”

Will clicks along to the next image and has to suppress a gag. It’s a man half upright, mushroom caps dotted his face, his face desperate and gasping as he grabs at the nearest paramedic. Will reads the caption for that and grimaces.

“Okay, so . . . no drugs,” Will says. “They all seem to have just . . . gone to sleep and passed away.”

Hannibal tilts his head. “Tell me: were they diabetics?”

Will side-eyes Hannibal pretty hard for the question, but he still pulls out his phone and texts Beverly, because Hannibal was actually a doctor. And he’s far too proud to have cheated to becoming one, or to have settled for less than becoming the best doctor in his class.

Ten minutes, they have the confirmation for Hannibal’s theory.

“So, then the killer must have access to their medication,” Will muses, seeing where Hannibal was going with his diabetic theory. “He must have tampered with it, somehow, and he must know where their houses were so he could strike, and he must have medical knowledge in order to know exactly what the effect would be, so – ”

“So likely a pharmacist,” Hannibal concludes.

Will sends Beverly another text asking her to have the team look at where the victims vanished from and where the closest pharmacy was, and then he closes the file, because he really doesn’t want to add half mushroom people to his dreams any more than he already has. He closes his eyes and leans back and tries desperately to think of other things – fishing, his dogs, the essays he still needs to grade – but he keeps returning to that terrifying image of still bodies in their mushroom graves . . . and the still body of Abigail, cocooned in a diamond coffin.

Hannibal’s voice breaks him out of the revolving cycle.

“What do you make of this gardener?”

Without even opening his eyes, Will knows that Hannibal has several purposes to asking the question. He wants to know what Will thinks, because he’s still curious how Will’s mind

works. He wants to know how Will answers, because Will usually tries to sanitize the words coming out of his mouth. And he wants to disrupt the image of the mushroom victims, because he's jealous enough to want Will to think only of their little family.

Will pictures the spore of a mushroom, blowing gently in the wind before landing. Then it spreads, far and wide, until it connects and covers all. "Connection," Will murmurs. "He wanted connection."

"But not one he earned. He wanted to force it."

"Pot meet kettle," Will says dryly.

"I did not force my connection with Abigail," Hannibal objects.

"Abigail? No. But don't tell me you didn't root around in my mind, Doctor." When Hannibal stays silent, Will adds, "I saw you. Your true form. I just didn't know it yet."

" . . . I may have attempted to compel you," Hannibal admits after a long moment.

"Uh-huh. How'd that work out for you?"

"No better than the hypnosis. Mischa protected you very well. Usually it is a relatively simple matter to reach into a person's chest and take their heart in order to compel or control them. For you, I had to find an . . . alternate route."

Will pats around at his throat until he finds his pulse, still steadily thudding away. After he breathes a quiet sigh of relief, he turns to glare at Hannibal. "Seriously? You took out my heart?"

"I put it back," Hannibal says sulkily.

"How exactly did you even remove it?"

"Look at your stomach."

"Why would I – my heart is not in my stomach!"

"Look at your stomach, Will," Hannibal repeats, and he actually takes one hand off the wheel and, without looking, presses hard against Will's stomach, near his belly button. The gesture should mean nothing, but it sends a wave of dull pain thrumming through Will, like an old scar that isn't quite fully healed.

Will lifts his shirt once Hannibal takes his hand away, and sure enough there's a scar there. A single clean white raised line, as if he'd been gutted and then sewed back up.

"Oh my god," Will says faintly.

"I could not see it before, but Mischa laid down very strong enchantments to ensure that you could not be compelled or controlled. I could not remove your heart in the traditional manner, so I simply . . . made an incision and reached up to retrieve it." Hannibal smiles even as he

explains it, like it's as simple as him checking Will's eyes or something instead of *reaching up through his chest to rip out his heart*. "But even then, you were very strong-willed. I could force you to speak, and so I returned your heart."

Will considers the best way to punish Hannibal without hitting him, because they are driving and Hannibal may be immortal and able to walk away from a crash on the highway at 70 miles per hour without a scratch but Will would die so he doesn't really want to settle for his base instinct and punch him in his face.

Finally, he slides down in his seat and says, "You must have been a terrible therapist if that's the only way you could help your patients."

Hannibal's scandalized look lasts all the way until they hit the state border with Georgia.

They pass through the remainder of Florida in silence, because Will is trying to catch up on grading and Hannibal is apparently stewing over any better way to verbalize how he had essentially gutted Will to tear out his heart. It's silent through Georgia as well, with only one bathroom stop because Will's butt is numb and he enjoys seeing Hannibal's twitching eyes as he chows down on cheap gas station snacks.

Shockingly, Hannibal manages to restrain himself enough that he only comments, "I packed snacks. Healthy snacks."

Will loudly crunches down another Oreo. "In your bag of doom? No thanks. I might get my arm ripped out. Just like my heart was. Rather not take the chance."

The Hannibal Sulk meter climbs up another notch.

Will eats another Oreo.

When darkness falls, Will closes his laptop and turns to Hannibal. He's showing no signs of tiredness – no tired eyes, no sagging arms, no tensed legs – but he's been driving for nearly twelve hours straight and Will imagines even immortal beings need a nap once in a while. If not for the energy, for at least the chance of scenery.

"Should I take over?" Will asks.

Hannibal shakes his head. "I am fine, Will. I don't actually need sleep. I merely enjoy it."

"Still. You must be tired."

"Sleep, Will. I will awaken you if I truly need your assistance." He overrides Will's next sentence by taking one hand off the wheel and stretching it behind him into the backseat. When he pulls it forward again, a massive fleece blankets reveals itself from the darkness, thick and comfy and a nice soft shade of green. "You may drive tomorrow, if you wish."

Will gazes at Hannibal and determines that the likelihood of him crashing the car just to screw with Will is minimal, since he would need a way home, and so he accepts the blanket

and curls up beneath it.

It's very warm, almost enchantingly so, and Will falls asleep to the sound of gentle rain pattering on the roof and Hannibal's evening breathing beside him.

"What are you?" Will says.

The great beast grins, vicious and sharp, like a hunter with his meal in sight and one bound away. His wings are sleek and shining, tucked against his back, and his antlers are raw, like he's recently rubbed off the velvet. "Something you have never seen. And you are going to answer me."

"You're beautiful," Will tells him.

The beast blinks, and the grin vanishes. Somehow, that is not the answer the beast had wanted.

And yet what other answer could Will have given him? The great beast is the epitome of the perfect hunter, capable of flying and running and swimming, blending in perfectly in the shadows of the night, and fearsome enough to hunt the creatures at the very top of the food chain.

"What is the name of Abigail's mother?" the beast says, coming closer to loom over him.

"I don't know. What's yours?" Will asks, reaching out to touch one massive wing.

His fingers barely manage to brush the edge when the beast tenses and the wing mantles, high above the beast's head and out of Will's reach.

"No, don't do that. I wanna see," Will protests. "It's so beautiful. Let me see."

"Answer my question, or I will tear out your heart."

Will tries to get up, tries to reach out, tries to make the beast come closer, but his body is weak and uncoordinated, like a newborn kitten, and all he manages to do is fall to the floor and roll around, flailing like a man caught in a riptide trying to find his way to shore. But he persists, because he wants to touch that wing, that beautiful, beautiful ebony wing.

"Answer me, Will."

"It's like blood," Will says dreamily, giving up on the idea of getting up and just laying on the floor to gaze at those massive wings. "Like blood in the moonlight, black against the skin. Did they hurt when they burst through your skin?"

The beast crouches, eyes burning with sparks. Its claws come to rest on Will's shoulders, so close to his neck. "TELL – ME – HER – NAME!" the beast roars, pushing a claw against his chest.

"Claws," Will says, and also "Ouch. Stop that. I like your wings better."

The beast rises, wings sweeping forward like a cloak, head tilting in confusion. "Very well. I suppose I will need to find another way to make you speak."

Then the beast moves his claws to Will's chest, and the world goes white with excruciating pain.

When Will flails himself awake, still dazed and his heart racing with awakened memories, he finds that the car is silent. Hannibal's made progress: the air is a lot less humid now and there are a lot less cars around them. But they also aren't moving; they've stopped in some sort of motel parking lot, but so far away from the door that it's clear they've just stopped to park instead of having any intent to go in.

Hannibal, when Will turns to look at him, is staring down at his hands. They're trembling.

"What's wrong?" Will asks.

Hannibal clears his throat. His voice is as calm as ever, but his hands continue to tremble as he examines them. "We crossed into Wisconsin while you slept. This is . . . This is the farthest I have ever been from Florida in a long time. My powers are beginning to drain away. It is – unsettling."

You can't take Papa away from Florida, Will remembers Abigail saying. *This – this house, this state – it's very close to the only source of magic in this world that Papa can access. Without it, the Darkness would consume his heart, and he'd be dead.*

But at the same time: "Didn't you wander around Europe for a bit?"

"Yes. But that was when I didn't know."

When it becomes clear Hannibal is going to remain as stubborn and close-mouthed as ever, Will rolls his eyes and hitches the blanket further around him. He isn't cold, but it'll help Hannibal to not think about how he's giving information about a vital weakness to a regular old human. "Didn't know what?" Will prompts.

"Every Dark One starts off their journey thinking they can control the Darkness and the dagger," Hannibal says slowly. "Slowly, we all learn that one human soul is not enough to hold it back that which was born at the dawn of time. For a time, though, our own soul and our own magic is enough, and magic was plentiful enough in my own world that I was in a good place for centuries. But here, in this world, which has no magic? The Darkness has nothing to consume but me, and it gladly fed off of my heart and my soul as I traveled around the world. I returned to Florida because it is where I came into this world, and the tear in the fabric of the universe is just enough for me to continue to sustain the Darkness with what magic comes through. But the farther I go . . . well."

Will watches Hannibal's hands. They're still trembling, even though he clasps them tightly in his lap. "How much longer can you last?" he asks quietly.

He doesn't bother asking why Hannibal would still leave Florida, knowing it would sign his death warrant. He already knows the answer to that.

"A little while. As long as I have the strength to maintain my human form, I will be fine."

"But if you start to sprout wings and claws and antlers?"

"Then you should run. To Mischa, if you can. Away from me, if you can't."

"And leave you behind?"

Hannibal turns to him, and the trembling in his hands fades as he focuses those eyes of night onto Will, like a predator sighting his dinner. "Mischa wove magic around your heart and mind and soul, Will," Hannibal says. "If I lost control, I would eat you immediately – tear apart your bones and feast upon your flesh and drain your very soul dry of magic. And then I would continue hunting."

And he's being serious – Will can see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice and feel it in his mind. He knows without a doubt that it would happen.

"Who did you eat?"

Hannibal sighs heavily. "The Darkness thrives on negative emotions: anger, and hatred, and irritation. I returned to Baltimore to take back from title from those who wrongly assigned it to Abel Gideon. I meant to lay the Chesapeake Ripper to rest, then. I thought a short trip away would do me no harm."

I meant to frame someone for my crimes and sit back to watch the fireworks, Will realizes. *And then things did not go to plan.*

"I hunted Gideon down, and I trapped him, and I meant to serve him a final farewell dinner before I passed on the mantle. He taunted, as mouse taunts a cat when it is trapped with no way out, and perhaps, with someone who had not claimed to be the Chesapeake Ripper, I would have been amused by the defiance. But I was not. And I . . . By the time I came back to myself, there wasn't enough of Gideon left to frame anyone."

Will can picture it: Hannibal, starving and yet so, so full, surrounded by blood, meat hanging off of his claws, muscle caught in his teeth, bones scattered by his wings. Surprised and ashamed and still so, so, so *hungry*.

"I taught Abigail magic when I returned," Hannibal says solemnly. "She could never hope to defeat me, of course. But there are specific wards laid into my house which could delay me enough for her to get far away enough that I, in my right mind, would not attempt to pursue her." He pauses. "That is when we began to research you. Once I saw you, I knew that you, at least, would never turn her away. You could shelter her when I could not."

Sadness swells up in Will's breast. His empathy means that he feels Hannibal's pain, his bone-deep certainty that he could eat that which he holds dearest to him – and his certainty that he would not feel shame over it, only a hunger even greater than before.

Will is reaching out before he can stop himself, an instinct born of the land between his admiration for Hannibal and his fear, and he lays one hand on Hannibal's clasped ones.

"Let me drive, Hannibal," Will says. "Let me do this. For now."

Hannibal's proud shoulders waver, and then he bows to the inevitable, leaning forward and heaving a great sigh. Will has seen his person suit and he's seen his Darkness, but he's never truly seen *Hannibal*. He's glimpsed him, maybe, in the moments when he juggled eggs to make Abigail laugh or teased Will about stage magic, but only now is he seeing Hannibal without the finery of his suited shield or the intimidation of his magic – as a father, as a brother.

As a human.

"As you wish," Hannibal says, and that is that.

After that, they switch off without comment. Will drives until the road starts to get blurry, at which point Hannibal gently clears his throat and they pull off so Will can cuddle under the blanket and snore away the hours. Hannibal drives until his hands start to tremble, at which point Will takes them off the steering wheel and they pull off so Hannibal can pull out and down suspiciously glowing red bottles from his enchanted bag that Will pointedly doesn't ask about.

Wisconsin becomes Minnesota and Minnesota becomes North Dakota, and still they drive.

All the way, Will dreams of the great beast, with wings of ebony and a crown of antlers, and every time, he awakens reaching into the air to try and touch those beautiful wings.

By random chance, Hannibal is the one driving when they reach the border with Canada. The loss of his magic – Will saw him try and fail to magic dirt off of the windshield – has left him fairly grumpy, and the long line to cross the border makes even grumpier yet. As such, it's probably not a surprise that they get selected for a "random" search.

Will just sighs and submits to the pat down.

Hannibal submits, but his face is more akin to a cat forced into a bath than its normal graceful aloofness.

As the officer continues to drone on and poke around, and Hannibal starts to tremble again – not out of loss of magical control, but of the desire to tear the man apart and serve up some fresh protein – Will sidles over and weaves his fingers into Hannibal's. It makes him startle, but it also halts the murderous impulse in its tracks, and Will can feel without looking how the claws of the Dark One slowly recede into human fingertips.

"Officer," Will interrupts, a sweet smile on his face, "I hate to question you – you're only doing your job after all, and a fine job at that – but, see, we recently got hitched, and I'd really like to make it to our hotel before nightfall."

“Aw,” says the man. “You’re newlyweds? Congrats! You should’ve mentioned.”

Will throws an arm around Hannibal, earning himself a predictable annoyed glance, but the claws of the Dark One stay tucked out. Will turns up the drawl and honeyed charm, mostly to move things along, but also to irritate Hannibal, because it’s seriously funny and he can see why Abigail does it.

“Yeah, I scored me a real fine doctor,” Will says, letting his cheeks turn red. “He gets annoyed when I flaunt it, but, well, wouldn’t you flaunt a man like him?”

The man runs his gaze up and down Hannibal’s sharply dressed figure, and Will can practically see the dollar signs as he assesses Hannibal’s clothes and car and highborn airs.

Will lets Hannibal go, because he is warm and comfortable and Will really doesn’t need to get over-excited in public, but he uses the movement and leans in towards the officer. “He’s great,” Will confides in a whisper. “And the thing is we just got married, like, yesterday. And it’s been the first time in years we both could get away from work – we’ve had to delay this honeymoon at least twice – and it’s been our *dream* to hole up in a nice little shack for, oh, a few weeks with no one but ourselves . . .”

The man starts nodding rapidly before Will even trails off suggestively. “I got you,” he whispers back. “Go on, get that! Never let it be said that I held up a honeymoon. Your doctor looks like he could do with a good kiss or two.”

Will winks. “Leave it to me, officer.”

He doesn’t actually kiss Hannibal, partly because he thinks Hannibal might just lose his patience and disembowel everyone within a fifty mile radius, but he does smile as wide as he can as he sidles past Hannibal and gets into the driver’s seat. Hannibal grumpily rounds the car and gets into the passenger seat, and he doesn’t fold his arms across his chest like a child but Will can tell he’s sorely tempted to.

“Thanks!” Will calls out cheerily, and then they’re through.

Hannibal lets it simmer for about three whole minutes before he speaks.

“That was very undignified.”

“But it worked.”

“I did not appreciate it.”

“But it worked.”

Hannibal sinks further into the seat. In the corner of his eyes, Will can see the shadow of those great wings, twitching and shifting restlessly as the great beast tries to become comfortable again.

“Never again,” Hannibal declares flatly. “It was crass and undignified and beneath me.”

“Still worked.”

They get a hotel room when they hit Edmonton. Usually they just switch off and keep driving, because Hannibal enchanted the roof to act as one big solar panel and has a secondary enchantment to make the gas tank self-refilling, but when Will gets tired and looks over to wonder why Hannibal hasn’t stopped him to take over driving, he sees that Hannibal’s hands are no longer trembling.

Now they are black as night and clawed – the hands of the Dark One.

Hannibal notices him looking and quickly tucks his hands into his pocket. “I was hoping you would not notice.”

“How close are you to losing control?”

Hannibal hums. “We have time. It will take a while for the corruption in my fingers to reach my heart. I had tried to utilize the Grail to provide myself with food that would satisfy the Darkness’s appetite for magic, but my hunger has increased the further we have traveled, and . . . and I am out of blood.”

Well, that explains the glowing red potions. Hannibal must’ve been fooling around in the basement while Will packed.

Of course, there are always other solutions.

“I suppose,” Will says carefully, staring out through the window and deliberately not looking at Hannibal, “that hunting is not a viable option?”

“I didn’t think you would allow it,” Hannibal replies, sounding surprised.

And if anyone had asked Will a week ago if he would have let a man – even a magical one – hunt down and eat another for food, he would have said empathically and absolutely not. The murder would be bad enough, but to add cannibalism? Will would’ve said no, nope, and hell no.

But that was then, and Hannibal is now.

“I have dogs,” Will says after a moment. “Lots of them. Most of them are unadoptable, either due to their age or their temperament. I try to help them, but in the end, they are still dogs – they still chase smaller animals when I take them for walks, they still bite each other when they play, and they still bark when people knock on the door. To be angry at you for hunting would be like being angry at my dogs for barking. It’s in their nature. And it’s in yours.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Will sees the shadow of those great ebony wings again, flexing and mantling, as if Hannibal can’t deal with the fact that Will has accepted his hunting habits.

Because Will has. Sometime in between seeing the way Hannibal so clearly cherishes their daughter – the protections on the house, the way he’d thrown Will from him to check on her, the way he’d woven an entire pocket universe to encase her in – and seeing the way Hannibal

struggles as the Darkness begins to eat him alive, he's accepted that the Chesapeake Ripper (the scourge of the Baltimore, the white whale of Jack, the prize of the FBI's Most Wanted list) is just one facet of who Hannibal is, and honestly, not even the most dangerous one. Hannibal is a hunter and a predator and a killer, and to deny that as part of his nature would be to have a flawed understanding of Hannibal. And Will is very good at understanding people.

"I see," Hannibal murmurs. "But no. I will not hunt. It would take a great many kills to take off the edge of my hunger now, and we don't have the time. And Mischa . . . she was not as . . . understanding as you."

Will has already been bracing himself for the possibility that Mischa may not wish to hear their words, if they can even find her, but this is still an unwelcome development.

"Is this why she ran?"

"Part of it.

Will kind of wants to ask what the other part was, but this is probably more than Hannibal ever wanted to tell him, and right now, as Hannibal sees the first visible proof that he is losing control, isn't probably the best time to push him. So instead he just pockets the keys and says, "Let's get a hotel room for the night."

"Will, I do not need sleep."

"You've mentioned as such. But I do. And if the Darkness feeds on negative emotions and sleeping brings you enjoyment, I bet one good night's sleep can't hurt you."

"Oh," Will says. "It's you again."

The great beast snorts and paces around Will where he reclines in the chair, his great wings twitching in his agitation. "Tell me the name of Abigail's mother."

"But I don't want to talk about Abigail's mother," Will protests. "I want to touch your wings."

"Answer me, Will," the beast commands. "I cannot tear out your heart, but I can remove it via other methods, and those are far more painful."

"Let me touch your wings. They're so beautiful."

"Very well," the beast says. His form blurs, for just a second, and then when it sharpens anew, the beast is holding a very shiny, very sharp scalpel. It seems unbothered by the fact that it is using claws instead of fingers, as though it has done this before. "I suppose we must do this the hard way, then."

The patterns on the chair writhe and come to live, snaking across Will's body, entangling his arms and legs and neck in an embrace he can't wriggle out of it. At first the restraints prevent him from reaching out to touch those great wings as the beast looms closer, but then, when

the beast guts him in a swift, economical movement, the restraints keep him from moving away or escaping or even flinching.

It doesn't stop him from screaming, though.

The beast seems completely unbothered by the screams. In fact, it seems to relish them, even as it finishes the slice on Will's belly and then moves forward to reach inside of Will, pushing his questing fingers higher and higher until they locate his prize.

When the beast withdraws, pain burns through Will's body and the world grows hazy, but he somehow remains conscious.

Conscious enough to see the beast standing triumphantly in front of him, a knife dripping with Will's blood in one hand and Will's glowing, beating red heart in the other.

"Now then," the beast says, "let's try this again, shall we?"

When Will jerks awake, still clutching at his heart, he finds Hannibal staring at him like the creeper he is. He's perched on an ottoman, but his spine is so straight that Will thinks for a moment he's in a regular chair until Will realizes that his ebony wings are out, loosely folded against his back. His antlers are out as well, casting straight shadows on the floor.

"You remember," Hannibal says.

Will pushes himself to sit upright, his hand still rubbing at his chest in remembered pain. He has no idea how he could have forgotten that. "You really just went for it, huh. Just . . . took out my heart."

Hannibal inclines his head. He shows no remorse, but Will didn't really expect any, so it doesn't bother him. "To remove and control someone's heart is no simple feat. It requires great confidence, great skill, but above all great control, so not many sorcerers are talented enough to take more than a handful. Yet the reward is far greater than the risk, for controlling someone via a heart is far more reliable than any other method. I have harvested many hearts over the years, and I must admit that sometimes I prefer to stick to reliable methods."

"But it didn't work with me."

"It did not," Hannibal agrees, his lips quirking up into one of his small smiles. "It was at first very frustrating, but now I can acknowledge that it was also fairly intriguing."

"Glad to know I intrigued the great Chesapeake Ripper."

Hannibal's wings flick dismissively, like he's amused at Will's sarcasm yet understands that the jab is meant both as an insult and an acknowledgment. They're much more expressive than Hannibal's face, as Hannibal probably has spent more time perfecting the poker face on top on his person suit and hiding his wings than masking the emotions his wings demonstrate.

"You kept wanting to touch them," Hannibal notes, seeing where Will's gaze as gone.

Will shrugs. “Every kid goes through a phase when they wish they could fly. And you have wings – you *can* fly. Wouldn’t you want to touch the wings of something who could fly?”

“I suppose humans have always been fascinated with beings like Lucifer,” Hannibal says, his wings curling up and out like an angel about to take flight.

“How like you to immediately think of Satan,” Will replies, because seriously. It certainly fits with Hannibal’s personality – the most beautiful being in creation who questioned, who rebelled, who was cast out and ended up forging a new life for himself. “But I was actually thinking of dragons.”

“That’s because you’ve never seen a dragon. I assure you, my wings are nothing like theirs.”

Hannibal actually seems a little disappointed. Like it’s a little beneath him to be associated with a dragon.

Honestly.

That doesn’t stop Will from still wanting to touch them, though. “Will it hurt you if I touch them? Your wings,” he clarifies, when Hannibal looks like Will had whacked him over the head and grabbed his wings instead of asking for permission.

“I . . .” Hannibal’s claws twitch in his lap, and his wings unfold and stretch out, unveiling their true length to Will. They’re enormous, enough to put any dragon to shame. “I do not know.”

Will looks at Hannibal – at the way his wings stretch to display their beauty, at the way his eyes fixate on Will’s hands, at the way his shoulders stiffen – and Will *knows*.

How could Hannibal know if someone touching his wings hurts if no one ever has?

Will holds out a hand: not demanding, not insisting, not forcing. “I’m just asking, Hannibal. Feel free to refuse me. But can I touch your wings?”

Hannibal looks at him for a long, long moment, at once a wolf assessing the risk of showing a soft underbelly and a lamb wanting to feel the hand of kindness upon its coat. The darkness blurs the line between Hannibal’s form and the shadows of the room until he seems to have become one with the shadows, albeit one with jagged points on the top and twitching wings on the side. But Hannibal hasn’t survived so long by being indecisive forever; in one swift movement, he stands and strides across the room, wings opening wide as a giant maw.

And Hannibal says, as he comes to a stop in front of Will, wings on either side like a threat, “How could I refuse such an offer?”

So Will reaches out and touches a wing. The skin is indescribable – the silkiness of a satin sheet, the warmth of a downy coat, the rough stubble of sandpaper. With each inhale of Hannibal’s chest, they twitch and dance, little involuntary muscle movements that betray their presence in the real world as opposed to an illusion. It is very hard to make out much details in the darkness, but Will already knows that even if he could see it in daylight, he

would have no words for these wings: not for their color, not for their feel, not for their appearance. They are as extraordinary as their master, and all the more stunning for it.

Will looks up at Hannibal and sees the wary curiousness on his face, how he appears to have begun to tense and brace himself only to stop midway and abruptly relax, takes in the way his pupils have expanded as he focuses on every single movement of Will's hand on his wings.

So Will just says, "As I said: they're beautiful."

After that, Hannibal doesn't attempt to hide his true form anymore. He uses a wing to bat a chocolate bar out of Will's hand when he's driving, he claws open a Tupperware container of packed meats for dinner, he knocks an energy drink off the rack before Will can get to it. He would have done all of those things before, but now he expresses himself with his true form, even if he explains that he's cast spells to prevent other humans from realizing just what they're seeing when they look at him.

"What, you didn't feel the need to block my sight too?" Will demands, trying to distract Hannibal long enough to stick a different energy drink in his back pocket as they shop for supplies on the last stop before they hit the town with Mischa.

"The spell doesn't work on you. It never has."

Hannibal waits until they get to the register to swipe out the drink and replace it with water, because he never misses a chance to show off.

Will eats his crackers as loudly as he can for the remainder of Hannibal's turn driving.

When they enter the town, Will knows immediately that they've arrived at the right place, and it isn't due to the town sign on the outskirts or the GPS cheerily announcing they've reached their destination.

It's because Hannibal's wings burst wide open, demolishing the seat behind him and narrowly missing Will's head.

Will slams on the brakes, because he doesn't want to die, and it's very hard to drive with Hannibal right next to him gasping and groaning and twisting as he struggles to rein in his wings, which are flapping hard enough to send objects crashing out of place in the car which Hannibal has obsessively kept neat their entire journey.

Finally, Hannibal's wings slow and stop, and then soften and fold back up.

"She is here," Hannibal says.

"I guessed as such," Will says dryly. "But uh. Did she cast something to prevent you from entering or what? Because I've never seen your wings do that."

"Prevent? No. Think of it more as an . . . early detection system, if you will. Just like a spider might spin a few threads at the edge to know if something is approaching. She might be

aware that it is me, but she will be forewarned that someone very powerful is approaching the town, and she may decide that it is prudent to vacate the premises."

And that's a hurdle that Will does not want to cross. "Can you stop her?"

"Only if I was at full strength."

"So it'll be up to bargaining with words. Okay. I can do that."

"Will, I don't think – "

"Hannibal, she's been running from you since the dawn of time. If you attempt to approach her, she'll just vanish on us, and we don't have the time to drive all the way back down to Florida to figure out where she's vanished to. You stalk," Will recalls, "I lure. So let me lure. Otherwise, why did you even bring me along?"

Will's not sure which argument makes Hannibal concede, but concede he does, so that's the important bit.

"Be careful, Will," Hannibal says softly, and one of his wings uncurls just enough to brush down Will's side. "Just remember that my sister isn't any more human than I am, and she's currently far more powerful. She could kill you in less time than it takes to blink."

Will pats the nearest wing and then opens the car door. "You're plenty human, Hannibal. Sibling drama is probably the oldest drama on earth. Just wait here, okay?"

He closes the door before Hannibal can say anything else.

When he gets into the town proper, Will heads to the coffee shop. There aren't many shops in the town square, and this is the only one that affords a perfect view of anyone entering or leaving. On top of that, with plenty of guests sipping hot drinks and typing on laptops, it's the perfect place to blend in and wait out a storm.

Will knows a lot about blending in, but more importantly, he knows best how to spot a predator camouflaging themselves within the sheep.

It also helps that he remembers what Mischa looks like.

He casually meanders up to the front, ordering a hot chocolate and asking for directions. He makes sure to keep his voice at just the right tone to be overheard without getting overly loud. And then, as he sips at his cocoa and meanders over to the town map, he makes sure he passes right by a young blonde woman sitting with her back to the wall in the corner, eyes trained on the reflection in the display glass to see everything going on outside.

"Hello again," Will says, staring at the map. "You look pretty good for an immortal sorcerer."

The woman blinks, as if completely startled, and says, "I'm sorry, have we met?"

Will slides into the chair opposite her. Her eyes are the same shade of maroon-brown as Hannibal's, but there's the faintest ring of gold around them – the only indication that she, like him, is something a little bit more than an average human.

"You went by Mia then," Will continues. "And before that, you went by Merlin."

Mischa's gently tapping fingers come to a complete halt. She goes still, like a predator who has sighted prey, and then she sets down her own cup and focuses completely on Will. "Someone has been telling stories," she says lightly. "Everyone knows I did my best by the Once and Future King. He'll rise again, when he's needed. I can't do anything to hasten that. Nor will I tell you where Excalibur is. The sword will reveal itself when it is needed. Your quest ends here, I'm afraid."

Will plays along. "I've heard earlier stories than that, actually. In those stories, you go by a completely different name."

"Oh? And what stories were those?"

"You went by the name Mischa. I guess you really liked names beginning with 'M' huh?"

Mischa's eyes go completely gold. The background noise in the coffee shop cuts off abruptly, like the world has gone quiet, so that all Will can hear is the thunder of his own heart. When Will risks a look around, he sees that the world *has* gone quiet.

Because everyone is frozen, mid-motion and mid-word.

Will looks back at Mischa. The façade had vanished completely; no longer is she Mia the human, or Merlin the sorcerer, or even the sweet and friendly stranger making conversation. She is Mischa, the woman who dared to make a stand against the Darkness and say *I will not be party to this*.

"I thought I sensed something," Mischa says quietly. "But I had hoped I was mistaken. So. My brother used a human to do his dirty work."

"Your brother didn't do anything. I came of my own free will."

"I'm sure you did. Hannibal can make anyone think that his thoughts are their own. And that's assuming he even bothered. If you even have your own mind anymore, you likely don't have your heart."

Will unzips his coat and pulls up his shirt. The scar goes bright red and warm when Mischa's golden gaze falls upon it. "I'm still in full possession of my mind and my heart. Hannibal tried, you know. He found it impossible to remove because of you. Some leftover spell from when you and I met, all those years ago."

Mischa's forehead wrinkles. "I don't – Will? Will Graham?"

"I'm glad you remember."

“I remember that you made me a promise,” she says, and the table vibrates beneath her fingers. “I remember that you swore you would never betray me.”

“Oh, you do not get the right to be angry,” Will shoots back. “See, the reason I drove up here isn’t about Hannibal. It’s about this little thing called *when were you going to tell me that I had a daughter*. I’d quite like an answer to that, Mischa. I’d really like to know why you would put my name on her birth certificate but not tell me anytime in the past, I don’t know, seventeen or so years.”

Mischa sighs, and the gold goes out of her eyes. “Is Hannibal holding her over you? I can fix that.”

“Oh, Hannibal would never hold our daughter over me. Didn’t you know? He adopted her.”

For the first time, Mischa appears truly shocked. Her mouth parts, her eyes go wide, and her hands go still once again. And yet, it’s still very contained and very controlled. Will is reminded of Hannibal’s own gestures of shock, so small and yet so meaningful.

“I think we’d better discuss this at my home,” Mischa says.

Then she snaps her fingers, and a cloud of bright gold dust rises up and swallows them both whole.

Mischa’s house is small for a regular home, never mind compared to the opulent luxury of Hannibal’s mansion in Florida. It has one floor with an open plan that rotates around a central wall that contains a crackling stove. The entryway is insulated, to prevent the draft from sweeping in, but once Will blinks away the spots from the sudden relocation, he notes a comfortable bed next to dresser, a desk with several books, a modest kitchen, and a closed door further down he presumes is the bathroom.

It’s not so dissimilar from Will’s own house, actually.

Mischa unzips her thick winter coat. With a casual flick of her finger, it floats through the air to hang itself neatly on the hook, followed by her scarf and her gloves. “Make yourself at home. This is going to be a long conversation.”

Will obeys, partly because he wants Mischa in a more cooperative mood for when he tries to ask about reconciliation and partly because even he knows it’d be awkward to keep standing when she sits.

“I should have told you,” Mischa admits. “I thought about it. Many times. But I’ve been running for Hannibal for so long that it was instinct to keep on hiding any trace of my presence.”

“Because Merlin is so unknown.”

“That was a mistake. I had recently entered your world, and I had just lost everything: my brother, my teacher, my entire world. Arthur practically shone with light magic; I thought,

perhaps, that by helping him, I could begin my atonement."

Will considers this. "Atonement for Hannibal? I thought the Darkness existed before him. He just took up the mantle."

"He took up the mantle because of me. He increased his strength in dark magic because of me. And he killed, god, he killed thousands because of me." She swallows and looks down. "Can you imagine, Will? An entire world saturated in fear and death and darkness, with each death feeding the expansion until there is no stopping it. That is what I unleashed upon my world, all because Hannibal took up the dagger."

"Something tells me Hannibal might have taken up the mantle no matter what."

Mischa smiles wryly. "You think it was destiny? Destiny is what we make it, Will. And there's always a choice."

Will looks at her and sees the brittle agony, weighing down her shoulders like chains attached to the tombstones of those she saw Hannibal kill. She's had hundreds of years to forge those links and add those tombstones; he can't undo the guilt she feels with one conversation. So he abandons that – there is no one she can ask forgiveness from, and he suspects she still isn't ready to accept that Hannibal might bear a greater share of that responsibility than what she assigns him.

So he switches topics. "So you didn't know that Hannibal would adopt our daughter? He seems to have had no idea you were the mother."

"He would have had no reason to think she was. I learned magic very late in my life, and you of course have none. Our daughter was like any other human when she was born. That was why I felt safe leaving her to be cared for a normal human family. And I could never have imagined Hannibal adopting a child. Not without a partner, anyways."

"Hannibal has a habit of . . ." Will sighs. "Well, you know him. He likes nurturing the murder spark in people he senses have potential. Someone mocked him about it, about only selecting adults and not nurturing it himself, and so he went out and found a child."

"Of course he did."

"And because they were in Florida, I guess Abigail's magic blossomed, so he chose her. He raised her, and eventually he came to love her as his own, so he taught her everything."

Mischa nods. "Yes, Florida has been a growing hotbed of magical activity. Hannibal came into this world with quite a bit of force, and so his entry tore a . . . hole, if you will, in the fabric of this universe. And so magic still leaks through, settling in the people around it and causing quite a fair bit of disruption in the ocean."

"And no one noticed?"

"Oh, humanity noticed alright. You just have a different name for it. You call it the Bermuda Triangle."

Will covers his eyes and groans. On one hand – *of course* Hannibal would be powerful enough to cause the goddamn Bermuda Triangle. He probably ate the poor sods who rescued him from the sea. On the other hand, if Hannibal was powerful enough to cause the Bermuda Triangle and he says Mischa is stronger . . .

"And your entry?"

"My journey to this world was carefully planned and carefully organized, and so although there is always magical bleedthrough, mine was limited to the lake I landed in. You might know it as the Lake of Avalon." She pauses. "You can't find it now, of course. I cast enchantments to conceal it when Camelot fell, and I strengthened those enchantments when I felt Hannibal's arrival. I had to make sure he couldn't use those waters to find me."

"Well, now he's found you. Are you going to run, Mischa?"

She tilts her head, her eyes flickering between gold and that maroon-brown. "I could," she says slowly. "I could wipe your memories and flee. I am not bound to my source of magic, as Hannibal is, for I prepared long ago to ensure I could walk on this world without fear. Hannibal, on the other hand, can't pursue me too far from Florida, not unless he wishes to lose his mind. The Darkness has no interest in me, aside from a rival to crush. And I've done nothing to attract its attention."

"Or you could talk to him. Lay this to rest."

"You don't know my brother."

"I have a gift for seeing people. And I've seen your brother. I know him probably better than you do, now. I think your knowledge is a little out of date."

"That's what he wants you to think. Do you think Hannibal likes suits simply because they are formal? No. He enjoys crafting layers upon layers upon layers. He's had thousands of years to perfect his person suit, and he wears several. I lost sight of the man who was my brother a long, long time ago. And I stayed – I stayed longer than I probably should have, hoping for a glimpse inside the stitching. But the longer you wear a mask, the more you become it. And he's gone."

Will wants to say, *People change. That's kind of how life works.*

Will wants to say, *He's had thousands of years to search for you, and that still peeks out from behind his mask.*.

Will wants to say, *But sometimes the longer you wear a mask, the more it becomes you.*

Instead, Will says, "I touched his wings. I held out my hand, of my own free will, awake, and sober and eyes wide open, and he let me touch his wings. He let me see him, and the problem with me is that once the door is open, I see everything."

Mischa's jaw drops open. The gold in her eyes fades away, and at once she's a little girl again, frightened by her brother's true form and wishing for a return to simpler days.

“He never – I haven’t even – ”

Then her eyes narrow. She understands what it means, for Hannibal to risk everything to travel so far away from his sole source of magic, for Hannibal to allow someone like Will to see everything that he is, for Hannibal to let a human touch the wings of his true form and not slaughter them immediately afterwards.

Mischa leans forward. “Why are you here, Will? Hannibal wouldn’t send you ahead just for the sake of my feelings. He doesn’t want me to run. Why?”

“We need your help,” Will says, weighing his words carefully. He needs her to understand that she is needed, and not just by Hannibal. Will needs her. And their daughter needs her. “Our daughter has fallen under a spell, and Hannibal said you alone might have the strength to break it.”

“What kind of curse? Hannibal’s strong enough to break any normal spell; only a true curse might be beyond him.”

“I don’t know.”

“And that’s why Hannibal sent you alone,” Mischa realizes. “He knew I’d need to talk to him to get more information. Clever.”

Will can see her weighing her options. Part of her still wants to run; it’s become a habit, a facet of her very being, after so long spent looking over her shoulder and letting her feet take her forward and away. Part of her wants to refuse and expel Hannibal from the town with magic; she could walk up to the town border and stare him in the face to watch his despair sink in at the fact that he knows where she is but can never reach her. And part of her wants to accept – wants to take Will’s hand, wants to see their daughter, wants to *hope*, foolish as that dream might be after a thousand years.

Will decides to add a little push in that decision process.

“I came here for our daughter,” he says quietly. “I tried to get to know her, to make up for all the years you robbed me of, and now I might not be able to. So, maybe Hannibal does want you to talk to him to sort this out. But don’t pretend it’s only about what happened between you and him. You owe it to me, Mischa. And you owe it to our daughter.”

Mischa puts her head in her hands. She’s torn, and Will knows that feeling intimately.

She isn’t the only one, after all, who was tempted to walk away from Abigail, blood connection be damned.

Maybe it’s the guilt of robbing Will of the knowledge of Abigail’s existence. Maybe it’s her longing to see the child she gave up for a better future. Or maybe it’s the faint flickering of hope deep in her soul that she’s never lost: that maybe Hannibal would one day come back to her, and that maybe all would be well, and that maybe they could be a family again.

Whatever it is, when Mischa lifts her head back up and meets Will's eyes, gold and maroon-brown, he knows what she's decided to do.

"Okay," Mischa says. "Bring me to Hannibal."

Hannibal is waiting for them when Mischa teleports them to the edge of town in a cloud of golden dust. Either he's still losing control or he just felt the need for the protection of his Dark One form, but his wings are fanned out against the car and his antlers are prominent above his head and his claws are evident in the hands he's holding loosely against his sides. Even his eyes are the dark pools of night that Will's seen only in his true form.

Will doesn't wait for Mischa; he strides forward to meet Hannibal's questioning gaze. As he approaches, Hannibal straightens from where he was leaning against the car and curves his wings down so that they encircle Will and Hannibal.

"Hey," Will says casually, "so I found Mischa."

Hannibal's lips quirk up. "So you did. Remarkable, as always," he says, and one of wings curls tight around Will like a blanket.

Then he looks up and sees Mischa and he freezes.

Will freezes too, mostly because Mischa is carrying a big golden sword in one hand.

"Mischa," Hannibal breathes, his wings trembling against Will like he can't hardly stop himself from reaching out to her. Then he seems to remember himself, and goes still. "Really? A sword, all for me?"

"Hello, Hannibal," Mischa says calmly, even though Will can see how her fingers quiver around the sword. "And no, the sword isn't for you. Excalibur can cut through almost anything though. I thought it might be useful in this case. Now, what's this curse that Abigail has fallen prey to that is so strong that you decided to drive all the way up here to consult me on?"

Hannibal shuffles, ever so slightly. Remorse is foreign to Hannibal, Will knows, but that doesn't mean he's incapable of feeling it. "A sleeping curse. I used an apple from the tree that sprouted from the original's seeds, before you ask about the source."

"You – " Mischa shoots him a look of complete exasperation. "Of course you did."

Will shrugs when she turns her gaze on him. "You didn't ask who cast it. But you did say you knew Hannibal well enough."

"I am simultaneously surprised and not surprised," Mischa says dryly. She raises her hand and sheathes Excalibur smoothly in the case on her back. Then she crosses her arms across her chest like the annoyed younger sibling she is. "Hannibal, seriously. You didn't need me to break this curse. I can't believe you out of all people would have forgotten that loophole."

Will looks from Mischa's expression of amused exasperation and Hannibal's defensiveness and then back. There's clearly something they know and aren't going to tell him because they're too busy being smug.

So Will sighs and raises his hand. "Hello? How about an explanation for the only human in this conversation?"

"Breaking the curse requires a kiss of true love," Mischa says.

"Yeah, but Abigail's like sixteen. She doesn't have a prince yet. Or princess."

Mischa smiles, but a tiny smile, small and full of secrets. It's so like Hannibal's that he's almost taken aback. Either immortality teaches someone how to smile like that, or it's genetic in Hannibal's family.

"Who said it had to be romantic love?" Mischa asks. "True love is so powerful because it transcends common sense or time or space. Do we typically find it in romantic stories? Sure. But if a father loves his child truly and deeply, without reservation or regret, enough to sacrifice himself and all that he is to give her everything he needs . . . well. A curse doesn't care if it's romantic or familial or platonic true love, Will. It just has to be true and strong and pure."

And, well, when she puts it like . . .

Will turns and glares at Hannibal. "You made us drive all the way to Alaska when you could have just kissed Abigail and broken the curse?!"

Hannibal's wings twitch, and he doesn't meet Will's eyes. "I did not believe that would work."

"You of all people should know it works," Mischa interjects. "Maleficient was a Dark One, once. She should remember how her own curse was broken."

"We don't like to think about our failures," Hannibal says dryly. "The Darkness doesn't tend to look favorably upon those amongst its hosts that decided to leave being the Dark One behind. Even less so with one who broke from the Darkness and chose her daughter over power."

Will squints for a moment, but even though what Hannibal is saying is remarkably different from the story Will grew up hearing, he hears no disagreement from Mischa – and, more importantly, Hannibal's expression indicates that he is telling the truth. *Perhaps stories get warped when they travel from world to world, as well as from generation to generation,* Will decides.

He pointedly doesn't think about how similar Maleficient's story is to Hannibal's.

"Right," Will says. "Either way, does that mean we can break the curse? Completely and without problem?"

Mischa dips her head in agreement. “Yes. I’ll come with you, just to make sure. And I can offer a lift that’s faster than your mortal cars,” she says dryly.

One golden dust cloud later, and Will goes from shivering from the cold wind to sweating in the sweltering humidity. Hannibal unfurls his wings, as if stretching, but one immediately curls back down around Will again, protecting him from the sunlight reflecting off the windows and into his eyes.

“You know where I live,” Hannibal says to Mischa.

“Google Earth is amazing for stalking,” is all Mischa says in reply. She tilts her head. “Mind adding me to the wards?”

Hannibal’s eyes go dark again, and he raises a hand. A few words and a gesture later, Will can just about glimpse the shimmery curtain of the wards as they part obligingly before their master. If he hadn’t been paying attention, he would have thought the shimmer was just the sunlight reflecting off the ocean. It also explains why Will felt a bit uneasy entering Hannibal’s property before Hannibal acknowledged him and willingly let him into the house.

“If you hadn’t invited me in, what would the wards have done to me?” Will asks Hannibal curiously as they begin to walk down the driveway.

Hannibal smiles slightly. “Nothing too terrible. But you would not have been able to leave.”

Will imagines Hannibal and Abigail hunting down anyone unfortunate enough to be caught in the spider web of Hannibal’s magic, and concludes that yes, Hannibal probably has a lot more fun when he lets prey in and then closes the door behind them.

“Why am I not surprised.”

Once they reach the door, Hannibal raps sharply on it three times and announces, “We’re home.” The door smoothly slides open, and Will sees yet another shimmery curtain dissipate to allow them entry into the home. Mischa hesitates for a moment in the doorway, Excalibur glowing an angry red on her back, but then Hannibal says, “I welcome Excalibur into my home.” And just like that, Will sees the sheath return to normal as Hannibal’s wards accept the sword and Mischa.

Hannibal sweeps up towards the staircase without hesitation, but Will lingers a bit. First of all, he isn’t going to miss an opportunity to watch Hannibal march up the stairs like a king, and secondly, he’s very curious to see how Mischa reacts to Hannibal’s decorations.

Mischa doesn’t bat an eye at the ostentatious mirror in the hallway or the expensive art, but she does hesitate when she glimpses the giant stag’s head.

“Hannibal apparently taught Abigail to hunt,” Will offers.

Mischa blinks. “This is fake.”

“Well, yeah. The real antlers are upstairs.”

“No, I mean . . .” Mischa leans closer and reaches out to brush the skin. Sparks bloom into being when she makes contact, and Excalibur begins to glow again. “This was constructed out of magic, instead of being made using real materials put together or summoned from somewhere. Song and intent woven into being – a very high level enchantment. When you said Hannibal taught Abigail, I never imagined she’d be capable of such powerful magic.”

Hannibal’s steps on the stairs make them both look up.

“She is our daughter,” Hannibal says quietly. “She’s stronger than you know.”

After that, they climb in silence to the third floor. Mischa pauses at the sight of the mirror, which – apart from being lined with gold – looks like any other mirror. “You remembered.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says. “Your ingenious mirror kept me trapped in Wonderland for quite some time.”

Then Hannibal turns to the mirror and raises his hand. The final shard shimmers into existence between his fingers, and he carefully leans close to fit it into place. As it locks in, the mirror’s surface goes from a still reflection of Hannibal, Mischa, and Will to a rippling lake that gives a little glimpse into Abigail’s room.

Once they’re all inside the room, it’s like no time has passed at all. Abigail is still slumbering in her diamond coffin, protected by a glowing golden outline and crowned with a tiara of delicate flowers.

Mischa’s breath catches. “Is that our daughter?”

“Yes,” Will and Hannibal answer together.

Mischa slowly walks over, still holding her breath as if she’s afraid to disturb the peace of Abigail’s slumber. The golden line pulses once, but Mischa clicks her fingers and it fades away. She places one hand on the diamond coffin and leans down to examine Abigail, her face wrought with awe and sadness.

Will can sympathize. He never knew what he lost, for he never knew Abigail existed until she was grown. Mischa has had to live with knowing she was missing out on Abigail’s first words, her first steps, her first laughs.

“She’s beautiful,” Mischa whispers. “Oh, Hannibal, you have made her magnificent.”

Hannibal’s wings mantle, pride echoing from their movements, but Hannibal still presses one hand to Will’s back in lieu of his wing. “I alone cannot claim credit. She inherited as much from Will as she learned from me. And her magic certainly came from you.”

“Shut up and let me pay you a compliment, brother.”

And then it’s Hannibal’s turn for his breath to catch, and when Will risks a glance, he has to look away immediately because Hannibal looks like he’s about to cry. His wings curl in close, as if protecting him, but they do not exclude Will; instead it curl around them both, so Will ends up pressed up to Hannibal from shoulder to thigh. It’s warm, but a pleasant

warmth, and Will just leans in and enjoys watching Hannibal's mask crack in the presence of his sister.

Finally, Mischa wipes away her own tears and straightens up. "Okay. I can feel the curse. One true love's kiss should do it. I can of course attempt to break it with Excalibur, but you know as well I do that such a brutal cutting can have unintended consequences. I'd rather try the old-fashioned way first."

Mischa stares at them expectantly for a long moment before Will clears his throat and nudges Hannibal in the chest.

"You heard her, doctor," Will says. "Time to fulfill that prescription."

Hannibal casts him a baleful gaze. "Should it not be you who attempts this? I don't think – "

"Don't even try, Hannibal. Who changed her diapers? Not me. Who soothed her when she cried every two hours at night? Not me. Who fed her and bathed her and rocked her? Oh right, not me."

When Hannibal still seems hesitant, Will steps around so he can meet Hannibal's eyes. Hannibal obliges by lowering his wings to cocoon them in darkness, so that when Will looks up, he sees Hannibal's face and little else. It's intimate and everything Will would have run far away from before, but now he feels nothing but the pleasant, casual comfort that comes from being next to Hannibal and sheltered by his massive wings.

Will reaches up and touches Hannibal's face. It sends a warmth through his belly to see this great predator close his eyes at the contact with Will's hands.

"Hey, relax," Will whispers. "You're enough, Hannibal. You've always been enough."

"Once I wasn't."

"Abigail isn't Mischa," Will reminds him. "You've been chasing Mischa for hundreds of years, but you've never wandered too far from your source of magic. One threat to Abigail, and you were willing to travel as far as Alaska for her. If that isn't true love, I don't know what is."

Will pauses and lays his head on Hannibal's chest, knowing the kind of message it sends to a predator like Hannibal that Will is willing to bring his neck so close to Hannibal's sharp, sharp teeth. And sure enough, Hannibal's wings close in even tighter, only outmatched by Hannibal's arms squeezing around Will's waist.

"Wake up our daughter, Hannibal," Will says. "You're enough."

Hannibal sighs. "Very well. I will try."

And then he parts his wings and unwinds his arms from Will. Mischa just stays where she is, not even seeming the least bit surprised, but she moves aside when Hannibal steps forward. Hannibal dispels the diamond coffin with an absent gesture, and when the flower crown goes thorns and begins to cover Abigail in a secondary protective wall, he lets a thorn slice his

palm and the thorn hedge dissipates when a drop of his blood falls upon it. And then it's just Hannibal and Abigail, curse caster and curse victim, father and daughter.

Hannibal hesitates, but then he leans down and kisses Abigail gently on her forehead.

For a second, nothing happens, but then a ripple of magic flows outwards from Abigail, like a curtain of the sweetest smelling wind Will's ever sensed, and Abigail's eyes fly open as she sits bolt upright with a gasp.

The first person she sees is Hannibal, and, unfazed by the wings or the antlers or the claws, she throws herself at him with a cry of "Papa!"

While Hannibal hugs their sobbing daughter, murmuring steady reassurances to her in a language Will can't quite make out, Mischa sidles up to Will. She's still a bit tense, but there's a softness in her gaze as she watches Hannibal comfort their daughter, a vulnerability that makes Will want to hug her as well.

He doesn't, though. She'd probably just stab with him Excalibur.

"You were that confident that he could break the curse?" Mischa asks.

Will looks at her. "Hannibal always loved you, Mischa. He never stopped. Becoming the Dark One didn't make him incapable of true love."

"Well, he had a funny way of showing it."

Will shrugs. "He demonstrates his irritation with the rude by killing them, eating their organs, and posing their corpses in random places. Which I think you already knew about. Do you really think that he'd be less strange when it comes to showing love?"

Will spends the rest of the day in ensconced in the study. He helps himself to some of the prepared meals in the fridge and spends the hours curled up in the window seat, nibbling on fancy and amazing foods, sipping on wine, and paging through Hannibal's extensive collection. He knows it'll take a long time for Hannibal and Mischa to reconcile, never mind Mischa and Abigail, and he much prefers to avoid any emotional outbursts.

Surprisingly, Abigail seeks him out around lunchtime. She comes bearing two cups of Hannibal's darkest organic coffee as a peace offering.

"Hey, Dad," she says casually.

Will nearly chokes on his coffee. "You, uh. You gonna continue with that?"

Abigail shrugs. "You trekked all the way up to Alaska with Papa and convinced Mischa to come back and helped break the curse. If that isn't dad behavior, I don't know what is."

"Okay." Will hesitates. Abigail might roll her eyes, but it still needs to be said. "You do know that if Mischa had told me, I would have tried to be a part of your life, right? I don't know if I would've raised you, but . . . I would have at least visited."

Abigail does indeed roll her eyes. “It’s in the past, Dad. I know.”

“Have you talked to Mischa yet?”

“A little bit. But Papa looked like he might vibrate out of his suit, so I locked them in my room and went in search of food.”

“You locked . . . Wow.”

Abigail grins unrepentantly. “The longer it takes them to realize I put a locking spell on it, the stronger the locking spell gets. And I figure they’re going to have a *long* talk once they get started.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

Will looks at his daughter. He’s had no hand in raising her, but she’s strong and fierce and magnificent. He probably couldn’t have done half as good a job. She’s still a little unsure around him though, like a lion cub being introduced to its father for the first time. Not truly afraid, but unsure if she’ll be recognized as something to be friendly with or something to be ignored. She has Hannibal, of course, and she’ll always have Hannibal, but a lifetime of judgment about being adopted has left its marks regarding the question of her biological parents.

“Abigail,” Will says, “thank you for your bravery.”

“What?”

Will continues eating his food. Not changing his tone, he continues, “Thank you being brave enough to find me, and being brave enough to eat that poisoned pie to save me.”

“I just – ”

“You are loved, Abigail,” Will interrupts. “Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Hannibal loves you so much. Mischa and I didn’t give you up because we didn’t love you, or because you weren’t good enough, or because you weren’t brave enough to find us earlier. Mischa gave you up in the hope for a better life. And now that we’ve found you again, we’ll love you just as much as Hannibal does. You are brave, and you are strong, and you are *loved*.”

It’s probably the sappiest thing he’s ever said, and it’s emotional enough to make him uncomfortable – but that’s what being a parent is, isn’t it? Putting your own needs aside for your child.

The hug from Abigail is unexpected, but then again, Will thinks, they have a lot of hugs to make up for.

“Thanks, Dad,” Abigail whispers in his ear.

Dinner is a very sedate affair. Hannibal and Mischa emerge with an enormous *bang* as they break down Abigail’s locking spell, and although Hannibal is clearly miffed he’s also

relieved to have said whatever he needed to say to Mischa. Mischa, for her part, actually puts Excalibur away and moves in to help Hannibal prepare the food, so Will and Abigail count that as mission accomplished.

Afterwards, Hannibal whisks Abigail off to the study to scold her for the locking spell, and Mischa corners Will.

"You still haven't yelled at me," Mischa says lightly, but her tense shoulders betray her expectation of a fight. Or at the very least a lot of yelling.

Will shrugs. "I'm not very good at staying angry for long. Side effect of my empathy."

"Really? Not for keeping Abigail from you? Or wiping your memory?"

"Well, I can't very well go back in time and get those years with Abigail back," Will points out. "I'm not saying you're perfect, Mischa, or that you're forgiven completely, but I'd rather use my energy for more . . . useful pursuits. What's done is done. I have my memories back now, and I have plenty of time in my future to get to know Abigail."

Mischa's shoulders sag. Will sees, for the first time, how much it much have weighed on her, how much she must have kept it in the back of her mind, and wonders anew at how good the Lecters are at masks.

And then he forgets about it altogether, because Mischa's eyes begin to gleam with the same spark he'd seen in Abigail.

"Is one of those useful pursuits sleeping with my brother?" she asks.

Will nearly chokes. "I – I'm not – "

"I saw you ogling his butt," Mischa says. "And, relax, I won't be offended. Don't get me wrong, you were sweet and very nice to me, but I totally would understand if you wanted to jump in bed with my brother."

Will takes a large gulp of his wine, mostly to give himself a moment to think. *What is the correct etiquette,* he thinks wildly, *for when your former bedpartner and mother of your child encourages you to sleep with her brother? "I think Hannibal is just happy that I won't fight him for custody of Abigail or run screaming into the hills about the whole wings and antlers business," Will says carefully.*

Mischa actually rolls her eyes. "Yeah, because custody of Abigail was what he was thinking about when he let you touch his wings," she says sarcastically. "Will, seriously. Trust me. He's definitely interested."

"Maybe I'm not."

"Right, because a competent chef and doctor who's a great conversationalist, has a smoking hot bod, and who enjoys your morbid imagination is someone you'd totally not be eyeing."

“Asylum doctors are also very interested in my imagination, and I do not find that appealing.”

“Hannibal wouldn’t let you sit in a prison longer than a day before he’d get sad and break you out to poke at you in person,” Mischa points out.

And, well, she’s got a point there.

“And what’s more, you *like* it when he pokes you. Because he doesn’t think you’re fragile or broken or messed up. He thinks you’re remarkable.”

Remarkable, as always, Hannibal had said, eyes crinkling as he smiled.

Mischa is a predator as much as Hannibal is. They both know how to seek out a weakness in the armor and how best to strike to widen the wound and turn it into a fatal blow. Mischa leans forward to take the glass out of Will’s hand and sets it on the table, her eyes sparkling with challenge.

“My brother’s currently moping in his bedroom that you don’t like him as much as he likes you,” she says, voice low like a confession. “I think you should go prove him wrong. Preferably naked.”

“If you use magic to vanish my clothes, I *will* find a way to get back at you.”

“Move your legs and I won’t have to.”

Hannibal is indeed moping in his bedroom when Will knocks and pushes the door open. Apparently, moping for Hannibal means sitting sadly in an upholstered chair in a three piece suit, sipping wine out of a crystal glass and staring into a crackling fire. He’s definitely not drunk, but Will can see the slight hesitation in his movements as he blinks at Will’s sudden entry.

“Will? What’s wrong?”

“Er, nothing.” Will feels abruptly foolish, but the words of Abigail and Mischa give him the courage to continue. “Mischa said you were moping and I needed to stop you.”

“I am not moping,” Hannibal protests. “Merely . . . considering some of my past decisions.”

“Uh-huh,” Will says, because he can see where that path might lead. He makes his way over to Hannibal’s sitting area, swiping Hannibal’s wine on the way, and takes a seat across from him. The vintage is *very* good, when he sips it. “Are we counting trying to poison me as one of those past decisions?”

Hannibal gives him a look that would strip flesh from bone, if he wasn’t too busy being sad. Will can definitely see the drooping shadow his wings by the firelight.

“Possibly.”

“The past is the past. We’ve fixed everything now.”

“I nearly killed you.”

“And Abigail,” Will agrees mildly, taking another sip of the wine and barely holding back a face. “And I’m sure you’ve actually killed many, many more.”

“I take it you’ve decided against reporting me, then.”

“Yeah. I think it might get in the way of some things, not the least of which would be our daughter.”

And, wow, the *disappointment* that washes across Hannibal’s eyes is devastating. Will wonders if his face showed even a tenth of that emotion, because if it did, he can understand why Mischa rolled her eyes at him. It’s just . . . so blatantly obvious. And it makes warmth rise in Will’s chest, to know that he – like Abigail, like Mischa – is a person that Hannibal visibly *wants*, but wants in their entirety, without reservation or change or hesitation. Hannibal is willing to restrain himself from pursuing Will instead of just changing his mind with magic, and that’s something he wouldn’t be willing to do for just anyone.

So Will continues, voice calm but eyes locked on Hannibal, “And also, you know, it’d be kind of hard to arrange proper conjugal visits. People might wonder why I’d like to turn off the cameras and bring a spare set of clothes.”

Hannibal nearly falls out of his chair. His wings go from drooping to upright in two seconds flat. “Will, I don’t – ”

“Hey, just because I was a little overwhelmed by the monstrosity that is your mansion doesn’t mean I didn’t notice you showing off. The egg trick was neat.” It’s the wine that drives Will to keep speaking, or maybe the heat building in his chest at the *hunger* in Hannibal’s eyes, but either way words just keep falling out of his mouth. “However, I must admit I found that I was already eyeing you when you opened the door.”

Hannibal’s jaw works soundlessly, like he’s lost his voice. Finally he clears his throat and says, “But I thought you . . . you and Mischa . . .”

“Yeah, sleeping with Mischa is kind of what made me realize I was gay,” Will says. “And besides, I could’ve been bisexual. Either way, I have eyes, and I’m pretty sure they’ve seen you looking back at me.”

The hunger in Hannibal’s eyes takes on a new life, and it’s like a switch has flipped. No longer is Hannibal stumbling around, trying to find his balance as he takes in these new revelations; now the hunger is on the prowl, and Hannibal’s wings are high and mantled above his shoulders as he leans forward, every inch of his body whispering *danger* as the predator begins to emerge and take control.

Will, for his part, finds that he is so aroused he can hardly think straight.

But the game isn’t over yet, so he holds his tongue.

“Is that all your eyes have seen?” Hannibal purrs, sliding to his feet and slinking towards Will like a cat on the prowl. “Or have you been peeking beneath my suit?”

“Your person suit, definitely. Your three piece that cost thousands of dollars? Maybe.”

“How rude,” Hannibal says, and his words echo in the chamber made of his wings as they descend to enclose them both in darkness and warmth. “What’s to be done about such rudeness, Mr. Graham?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know. I bet that’d be more a doctor’s area of expertise,” Will shoots back. “You wouldn’t happen to know the proper treatment for rudeness, would you, Dr. Lecter?”

“You remarkable man,” Hannibal breathes, his eyes nothing but a dark desire that calls to the monster inside Will. “I think I’m going to keep you. After all, it might be a . . . very, very long treatment process. Experimental. With many possible side effects. And it would only be proper to monitor your treatment personally to ensure success.”

“Sure,” Will says, because that’s all his brain can manage with Hannibal’s wings at his back and Hannibal practically sitting in his lap. “That, uh, sounds great.”

Hannibal puts his face against Will’s hair, so Will can feel the way he grins like a Cheshire cat, resplendent and victorious. “The first step for effective treatment would be to remove all of these layers, Mr. Graham,” Hannibal says, and as he traces one finger from Will’s collarbone to his waist, his clothes begin to vanish into the ether. “After all, therapy wouldn’t be as effective if I couldn’t see all of you and render assistance where needed.”

“This sounds rather one-sided,” Will notes, shivering as Hannibal’s wings take their turns to rub against his back. “What’s in it for you?”

“A lifetime of exploration and new things to be discovered.”

“Well,” Will says, “that sounds like rather a long mission, so perhaps we should get this whole thing started. I volunteer to go first, since you decided to vanish my clothes on me.”

“And what if I would like to go first?”

Will smiles innocently, and then he neatly yanks back his feet from where he had slid them in between Hannibal’s legs, catching his heels on Hannibal’s ankles and pulling back so that Hannibal falls with a thump on the floor, briefly stunned but mostly pleased. Will lands on him a second later, pinning him to the ground and feeling pretty pleased himself.

“Too late,” Will says triumphantly. “I win.”

Abigail shrieks up a storm when she barges in the next morning to find them sprawled on the bed – Hannibal had eventually relocated them with magic, reluctant to stop kissing Will or let go of Will or even cooperate with Will’s efforts to stand up – with Hannibal’s wings folded around them both. Her glee lasts about five seconds before she starts yelling at them to cover

themselves, at which point Will groans and burrows into Hannibal's chest and tries to tune out the world.

Hannibal, thankfully, conjures a blanket around them, and then he kicks Abigail out.

Mischa ends up making breakfast, mostly because Hannibal and Will don't emerge until lunch, and Mischa spends most of lunch snickering at them anyways, so they retreat to Hannibal's bedroom and end up occupying themselves on Hannibal's bed and nearly missing dinner.

At dinner, Will looks around the table and sees Abigail and Hannibal and Mischa, and thinks, *I could get used to this.*

EPILOGUE

Hannibal holds a dinner party to celebrate their successful relocation back to Baltimore. He claims it's to announce his reintroduction, as it were, to society; Will's pretty sure it's because Hannibal wants to flaunt his newfound family, Mischa glittering on one arm and Abigail beaming on another.

"Don't think so little of yourself," Hannibal chides, when Will points it out. "I also would like to show off my remarkable husband."

"Isn't there a saying about counting your orgasms before you have sex?" Will teases back, like he doesn't always get a little thrill in his stomach when he sees the glittering ring Hannibal had slipped onto his finger after one particularly exuberant lovemaking session.

Hannibal pauses, one hand outstretched towards the little mountain of eggs he's set aside for whatever culinary magic he's planning. His eyes go narrow and sharp, mostly because he's already shooed Abigail out of the kitchen for joking that he might as well open a hen house for all the eggs he's collecting.

"I believe," Hannibal says, reproach clear in his tone, "that the saying is about chickens and eggs."

Will shrugs and steals a strawberry. "Oops. My bad."

Either it's the cannibal in Hannibal or it's the chef, but Hannibal gets pretty darn helpless around Will whenever he's mostly naked and eating in Hannibal's kitchen. Will spent a productive morning setting up the dog kennels in Hannibal's frankly enormous backyard and then a productive afternoon showering off the grime in Hannibal's excessive master bathroom, so now he's just leaning against the counter, barefoot and naked under a towel, and he wonders if the thrill he feels at the predator's glare Hannibal sends him, both aroused and irritated, is the same kind of thrill Hannibal gets when he triumphs over a pig.

"Will . . ." Hannibal begins.

Will shrugs again, and the towel – which had valiantly been trying to maintain the loose knot Will had tied before wandering out in search of food and Hannibal – finally concedes the battle and falls with a thump to the floor.

If there is one thing Hannibal has always been *very* clear about, it is that there is a very small list of activities that are allowed in his kitchen.

And by small, it's like drinking, cooking, baking, or meal prepping.

"Oh, whoops, my bad," Will says cheerily, and bends over to get the towel, taking his damn sweet time.

Hannibal is on him before he even manages to start to lever himself back up, breath hot against Will's neck and hands tight on Will's arms. His wings come to life, springing from the ever present shadows that follow Hannibal around, and wrap themselves around Will in a living cocoon of magic and power.

"You – ridiculous – man," Hannibal growls, words distorted by the accent that Hannibal usually keeps tamped down and mastered to a socially acceptable level. "You are *determined* to be rude."

Will laughs. Nothing has ever matched the thrill of making Hannibal lose control of his person suit, and he knows nothing ever will. It's why he agreed to move in with Hannibal, why he let Hannibal slip a ring on his finger, and why he knows he'll probably let Hannibal throw an outrageously over-the-top party when they finally get married. So far, he's managed to delay the ceremony mostly by being entirely unhelpful when Hannibal asks for his opinion or flirting shamelessly until Hannibal either teleports away or vanishes their clothes. Usually it's the latter.

"And what's to be done about that, Doctor?"

Hannibal is in the middle of showing him exactly what when they get interrupted by Abigail's piercing shriek.

"NOT AGAIN!" she shouts, so aggravated that her magic actually manifests in little sparks around her face. "Come *on*, you two! Can't you control it for more than one hour! I've literally been gone for one hour!"

"Abigail – " Hannibal says, because he always ends up being the placating one while Will laughs himself sick.

"NO! I AM NOT HEARING IT! I'M GOING TO MOM'S! SEXILED FROM MY OWN HOUSE BY MY OWN DADS I CAN'T!"

And then she's gone, with a slamming of the door that rattles the frame so hard Will's pretty certain it would break if it wasn't reinforced with protective enchantments by two of the most powerful sorcerers in the world.

“She did tell me she knew parents had sex,” Will says thoughtfully. “I guess she wasn’t really prepared to see it though.”

Hannibal laughs quietly and just draws him closer, wrapping Will up in his arms and wings. “You are terrible,” he murmurs. “I had planned a very nice dinner party planned to celebrate our return to Baltimore and your entrance into society, and now it will may to be delayed due to your behavior. And you ruined my proposal as well. You are absolutely awful for my self-control.”

Will shrugs. How can he possibly explain how alluring and flattering it is that with one raised eyebrow and a carefully cocked hip, he can cause Hannibal – the most powerful dark sorcerer in the world, the most dangerous serial killer, the most controlled predator – to just lose it?

Most people don’t give Will a first glance, never mind a second.

“You have magic. I’m sure you can make up for the lost time,” Will says, mostly because he knows how irritated Hannibal gets at the suggestion of him cheating with it comes to cooking.

Sure enough, Hannibal says, “I do not use my magic – ”

Will shuts him up with a kiss.

Abigail slinks back into the house about ten minutes before the guests start arriving. Will snags her before she heads upstairs to change and gives her a hug, mostly to watch her squeak and squirm, but also because after a second she hugs him back, just as fiercely. Winston comes up and barks at her, tail wagging in welcome; his pack has accepted his new family as easily as they accepted the fact that they have seven new strays to look after.

“Now go up and get changed before you give Hannibal a coronary,” Will says, and she darts away with a grin, Winston hot on her heels.

Thankfully Hannibal handles greeting all the guests, so Will’s free to just paste a smile on his face and just nod at appropriate moments. When Mischa arrives, he kisses Hannibal on the cheek and departs to converse with her, letting Hannibal hold court with the same regal air as always, especially now that they’re all staring in wonder at the fact that Hannibal let someone kiss him in public.

Mischa is snickering when he reaches her. She’s dressed in a stunning black gown, a plunging back to match the plunging cleavage, and he honestly has no idea how she isn’t using magic to make sure it stays on.

“Abigail was very distressed when she came over,” Mischa says, as if she lives halfway across the country and not literally next door, because Hannibal is that weirdo who buys all of the houses around him for “privacy”. They’ve been thinking about taking the plot on the other side of Hannibal’s house and turning it into a place for Abigail, especially now that she keeps walking in on them.

“She caught us in the kitchen.”

“You got my brother to sex you up in his sacred kitchen? Nice.”

Will eyes Mischa. She’s far too smug to just be happy that Will and Hannibal have finally christened every room in his giant mausoleum of a house. “What did you give to Abigail?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Mischa . . .”

“It was just a credit card! Honestly, Will, it’s not like she wants to come and talk to her fathers about sex. Hannibal would probably start drawing anatomical diagrams.”

Will concedes that’s probably true. Hannibal would probably also eat any suitor he found unworthy of Abigail.

Which might be all of them.

“I just pointed her at a few reputable shops, handed over a supply of condoms, and told her to come to me with any questions,” Mischa continues. “Simple good old-fashioned motherly advice time was had, and that’s it.”

Will sighs. “I call it on not being the one to tell Hannibal.”

“Only if I get to learn the name of those gorgeous ladies.”

Will squints in the direction of Mischa’s subtle little nod. Thankfully, the stream of guests has mostly ended, since everyone knows better than to arrive late to a Hannibal Lecter dinner party. All that’s left are a few stragglers, the ones held up by work and are held in high enough regard by Hannibal and Will that their slight tardiness doesn’t count against them.

“Um, Dr. Alana Bloom. And her girlfriend, Margot Verger.”

“Verger? Didn’t Hannibal refuse to take on her brother as a patient?”

“Yeah, Mason apparently just wanted to be nosy about Margot’s therapy. Oh, and he stabbed one of Hannibal’s chairs with a knife by, um, accident.”

From the look Mischa gives him, she knows exactly what Will means.

“Do you think,” Mischa says slowly, in between sips of her wine, “that Margot would grieve too much if her brother . . . took a little vacation? The mists of Avalon are a lovely place to wander, if you’d like some time to yourself.”

Will shrugs. “I think the only reason Hannibal hasn’t suggested it himself is because the Verger will means Margot would be left penniless without a proper male heir.”

“Oh, I can definitely fix that,” Mischa says with a wicked smile, her own predator gleaming in her eyes. “Be a dear and ask my brother to revise the seating chart, will you? And let him

know I'll take care of this particular pig."

Mischa swans off to conquer, the guests parting in her wake like the red sea.

Will, for his part, just goes to fetch Hannibal.

Hannibal's response, when Will advises him that Mischa wants to have Alana and Margot moved closer to her seat and is calling dibs on Mason, is a slightly concerned, "Oh, no."

Will sympathizes, mostly because Mischa's been having a little too much fun mowing her way through Baltimore society, chewing up rich lords and richer ladies left and right and causing no end of scandal at the operas and high society parties she attends with Hannibal. Hannibal certainly finds it funny, but he probably finds it less funny when Mischa shows actual attraction and interest in her prospective dates' lives as opposed to just wanting to know their name before she sleeps with them.

"I'm pretty sure she wants to woo them. And keep them. Both of them."

Hannibal sighs. "Well, Alana and Margot will certainly be welcome, if interesting, additions to our family. Poor Abigail."

"Yeah, I'm thinking we might need to start construction of her house sooner rather than later."

"I agree."

Hannibal straightens, carefully smoothing down his suit and fixing his tie before he turns and offers his arm to Will, like a gallant prince. His wings are hidden again, but Will can glimpse the shadow of them and feel the whisper of their presence against his cheek, adoring and welcoming as they always are.

"But first," Hannibal says, "we must hold dinner. Shall we, Mr. Graham?"

Will takes his arm, as drawn to Hannibal as Hannibal is to him. They will never be parted again, now that they've found each other, and they'll raise their family together, and they'll live out that magical dream of a happy ever after that Will thought only existed in fairytales. And it will be beautiful.

"Yes," Will says. "Lead the way, Dr. Lecter."

FINIS

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Final thoughts and notes:
1) The original Merlin basically turns himself into the tree guy. Because I wanted to do

tree guy, and also as a nod to how Nimueh traps Merlin in a tree in some Arthurian myths.
2) The singing to grow things with magic and the diamond coffin I borrowed from Eragon, because I really did like the Inheritance Cycle when I was younger.
3) The whole "say good-bye and hello" to the front door I borrowed from The Sisters Grimm, because I will read anything that has even a whiff of fairytales.
4) Excalibur and the Grail I borrowed from Merlin, because I'm a hardcore Merthur shipper and also Kingsman has reignited my love of Arthurian myth.
5) Yes, I headcanon Mischa in my fic as happily bisexual, and yes she does successfully court Alana and Margot, and they have a great time once Mischa uses magic to disappear Mason and allow Margot to get pregnant.
6) Abigail gets sexiled from both her dads' house and her mom's house, so she ends up with her own house next to Hannibal's.
7) The Darkness stops consuming Hannibal's magic and instead consumes the magic of the true love between Will and Hannibal, which is of course unending, so that's why Hannibal is able to move back to Baltimore without dropping dead. (That isn't how the Darkness works in the TV show, but meh)
8) Aaand then they all live happily ever after (Hannibal makes everybody immortal).

And thus ends my first completed multichapter work for 2019! I honestly thought I'd never get here. Or that here would be like 39k. Thanks for coming along on the ride, everyone!

End Notes

Find me @ Telegram as TheSilverQueen : Tumblr as thesilverqueenlady : Twitter as silverqueenlady : NewTumbl as thesilverqueen : Dreamwidth as thesilverqueenlady

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